

# Repentance

## Jonah 1:5–2:10

John MacArthur pastors a large church in California. As a ministry of the church, he has a seminary called The Master's Seminary where he has trained thousands of people entering the ministry. He has extensions of his college in many countries. We have a connection in our church to one of those locations in Honduras.

MacArthur gave a story of a piercing event that took place in his life that I never have been able to escape. He said,

I will never forget a particular lady who came into my office and informed me that she was a prostitute. She said, "I need help; I'm desperate." So I presented the claims of Christ to her. Then I said, "Would you like to invite Jesus Christ into your life?" She said, "Yes," and she prayed. I said, "Now, I want you to do something. Do you have your book with all your contacts?" She said she did. I said, "Let's light a match to it and burn it." She looked at me and said, "What do you mean?" I said, "If you want to live for Jesus Christ, and you've truly accepted His forgiveness and met Him as your Savior, then you need to prove it." She said to me, "That book is worth a lot of money. I don't want to burn it." She put it back in her purse and looked me right in the eye and said, "I guess I don't really want Jesus, do I?" Then she left.

When it came down to counting the cost, she wasn't ready. I don't know what the outcome of that poor woman has been. I do know that she knew the facts and believed them, but she was not willing to make the sacrifice. What she kept wasn't worth anything compared to what she could have had in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This story is devastating. It is horrifying. It is disturbing that she saw the cost of becoming a Christian and said, "Well, it is not worth it."

Jesus dealt with a man that came to the same conclusion. He came to Jesus and said, "What do I need to do to become a Christian?" From the very first question, he misunderstood the gospel. It is not what I need to do, but rather what Jesus has done. We do not have a religion that says "Do." We have a faith that says "Done."

Since this man wanted a list of to-do's, Jesus gave one. He said, "Do not kill, do not steal, and do not have sex outside of marriage." The man replied, "I can check the box on of all those." Jesus then told him to sell all you have and give to the poor (Matthew 19:21). This man

---

<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *The Superiority of Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 84.

considered the sacrifice and said, “No, thanks. Christianity is not worth it for me.” What he kept was not worth anything compared to what he could have had in Jesus Christ.

Now Jesus was not telling this man he could work for his salvation. Jesus was testing this rich man’s love. He wanted to know who was God in his life. Do you know who was God in this rich man’s life? Money! Money was God in this man’s life, and Jesus’ hypothetical scenario revealed this man’s idolatry. It is interesting to note that, after the rich man said, “No, I will not give my wealth to the poor,” Jesus did not say, “Just kidding. Come back and pray this prayer and you will be good.”

MacArthur did not tell this prostitute, “OK, you can go on as normal and show no real life change. Keep the book!” Unless the stories of this prostitute and of this affluent man continue beyond where we left off, one of them went to hell and the other is on her way. I want you to intellectually and spiritually grasp two truths:

### **1. Jesus could have saved both of these people.**

He could have saved the woman from her *unrighteousness* and the man from his *self-righteousness*. He could have saved her from *working the streets* and him from *walking in his morality*.

Some of you think you are too bad for Jesus to save. That is why you always say you are going to clean up your life, then get saved. Throw down that wrong theology. God is not saying, “I wish I could reach them.” He does not have T-Rex arms. God’s arms can reach into that pub, into that pornography addiction, and into that job idolatry. The enemy will whisper in your ear, “You’ve gone too far!” No one is too bad for Jesus to save, but there are millions who think themselves too good.

God can even reach into your self-righteousness—your church attendance, your morality, and your big kind heart—and save you from your failed attempts to please a righteous, holy God.

We have people in this room saved out of unrighteousness. They were bar hopping and bed hopping. Jesus reached into their lives, and they do not have the desire to hop anymore. Jesus completely transformed their desires.

No matter how far you have run from God, no matter where you are right now, God is whispering to you, “I can still reach you.”

We have people in this room who were saved out of self-righteousness. They were religious, but not Christians. They had some form of “Jesus religion,” but did not have the person

of Jesus in their lives. They were saved out of Catholicism, or they were sitting in a Presbyterian church without Jesus, or a Methodist church, or a Lutheran church; no doubt many were sitting in a Baptist church. Morality doesn't save you! Jesus does.

**Mini-Transition:** Jesus could have saved both of these people, but . . .

## **2. Jesus would not save either of them.**

That woman and that man were both in a boxing match with God. They wanted salvation without repentance. Repentance is turning from your sin. They wanted salvation without having to burn the book, salvation without having an effect on the bank account, salvation without a change in what goes on during the weekends, salvation without change. They wanted a little insurance: hell insurance. They want salvation—without it changing their lives. So they box God. Your arms are too short to box with God.

If you have salvation without repentance, you do not have the salvation that Jesus bled and died to purchase for you.

Have you ever met anyone who says, "I've invited Christ into my life," but there was not real life change? Here is who you met. You met someone that got "saved" without repentance.

**Transition thought:** There are three types of people in the world: the religious, the irreligious, and the Christian.

- The religious thinks he has no need of repentance.
- The irreligious could care less if he needs repentance.
- The Christian lives a life of repentance.

**Transition sentence:** We are going to see in our text today repentance in the life of a Christian. We left Jonah seven days ago while he was running from God. We pick up the story today, and he is still running. He's like Forrest Gump. This guy doesn't stop. God told him to go to Nineveh, and he fled to Tarshish. Nineveh was 550 miles one way, and he went 2,500 miles the other way. In the first three verses, the author keeps emphasizing the word *Tarshish*. Jonah fled to *Tarshish*—jumped on a boat headed to *Tarshish*—of all the places *Tarshish*.

Here's where I am going today, and I want you to go with me. We are going to look at the fallenness of Jonah and show how it reflects your fallenness.

### **1. You have a natural bent away from repentance.**

You are born with it. Look at how Jonah's life is mirroring your life in Jonah 1:5:

Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

Jonah did not jump on a pirate ship. Jack Sparrow did not say, “Welcome to the Black Pearl.” He did not step onto the deck of the Carnival Sunshine, greeted by a cruise’s activity director either. He stepped onto a cargo ship.

All of my research says that these ships were captained by Phoenicians. They pioneered exploration and trade on the Mediterranean Sea. Also, there were likely other ethnic groups on this ship too, which would explain why they are each calling out to different gods.

- The Phoenicians worshipped Baal, Hadad, or Anat.
- The Assyrians worshipped Assur, Isthtar, Ninurta, or Shamash.
- The Babylonians worshiped Marduk or Nabu.<sup>2</sup>

The more gods, the greater chance of escaping—that was their philosophy. The ship’s crew were polytheists and syncretists. They worshipped more than one god, or at least attempted to merge their religions.

This is rampant today. On Friday, our family prayed for an unreached people group in India. In India, Jesus is revered among millions. They put Him right on the shelf with their other gods. That is why our missionaries have to be theologically sound. They have to say, “If you accept this Jesus, you have to reject all these other gods.”

In this verse, everyone sends up their SOS prayer except for one person. Look at Jonah in verse 6: “So the captain came and said to him, ‘What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.’ ”

This is often the state of someone when they refuse to repent: they possess a deadly indifference. Jonah’s natural bent away from repentance made him indifferent.

It is interesting to me that these sailors acknowledged that “the gods” are free to act as they wish, but Jonah struggled to accept that God is free to act as He pleases. Jonah was about to receive a rebuke from a lost man, but he remained indifferent. “Why aren’t you praying? Do you care about our ship? Or the other ships on this sea? Do you care about yourself?” Jonah was indifferent to the sailors’ fates and indifferent to the Ninevites’ fates. Indifference is spiritually

---

<sup>2</sup> John Walton, *Jonah: Bible Study Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 17.

deadly.

There was a man named Tim in the church I attended when I first came to Christ. He told me that he owned a convenient store. He would put gospel literature in everyone's bag as he checked him or her out. One day, a man came with a case of beer. Tim checked him out, returned his change to him, then placed some gospel tracts in his bag. The man buying the beer pulled it out, looked it over, and said, "Isn't this kind of hypocritical of you. You're selling me beer so I can get drunk, then trying to tell me about Jesus at the same time."

That rebuke from a man who was not a Christian stayed with Tim. He ended up selling that store because of that conversation. He eventually opened a hardware store, and it exploded in growth.

The difference between Jonah and Tim is that Tim heeded the rebuke from a non-Christian, yet Jonah remained indifferent towards it. Watch his indifference continue in verse 7: "And they said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah."

Casting lots was a pagan way of finding who was responsible. Some scholars say it was like dice, others like stones and pebbles, and still others like different-sized pieces of wood. It really does not matter. God used it because He can use whatever He pleases to use.

The whole time they were bringing out the straws to see who would pull the short one, Jonah didn't say a word. He was just waiting for the game to begin. He was calm and detached while they were panicking.

Eventually, Jonah won the game, or—maybe more accurately—he lost. Then the crew came with a barrage of questions

Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1:8–9)

"I am Hebrew and I fear the Lord" is not a bold proclamation. I see in his speech perfect theology—yet utter hypocrisy. He was not proudly proclaiming that he feared the Lord. He hung his head and said, "I serve the God who made the sea."

They respond, "Wait! You worship the God of the sea. The same sea that's about to kill us?" Verses 10 and 11 continue:

Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.

They may have thought Jonah would say, “Take me back to the starting point where you picked me up,” or, “Just let me pray to Him for a while.” They were surprised when “he said to them, ‘Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you’ ” (Jonah 1:12).

I read this and asked, “Why didn’t Jonah just jump? Why ask them to throw you?”

Have any of you ever bungee jumped? When you stand on the top, sometimes you just need someone to push you off, right? That’s probably what Jonah needed.

You need to see something here: Jonah still was not repenting. He was resigning to the facts. See Jonah bend away from repentance in verse 13: “Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.”

They were without the true God in their lives and still tried to save Jonah from divine punishment. Jonah had the true God and could not care less about saving the Ninevites from divine punishment.

I enjoy contrasting Jonah and the ship’s crew. You remember me saying this ship was not a pirate ship or a cruise ship, right? How did they make money? Cargo. They were throwing money overboard to save this guy. Jonah was not even giving time, much less money to save the heathen people of Nineveh.

Verse 14 continues: “Therefore they called out to the LORD, ‘O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’ ” Like public executioners, they begged pardon for the action they were now forced to take.

“So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows” (Jonah 1:15–16).

This is no foxhole conversion. Vows were made—not during the storm, but after the storm. These men were converted to God. They started carrying more than cargo; they started carrying the gospel of God.

I do not want to preach the gaps here. Preaching the gaps is when you make a point out of something that *could* have happened. I do not want to do that, but it is interesting to think that Assyrians could have been a part of that ship's crew. Some scholars believe some Ninevites were part of the crew. That is not my point, but this is my point: Even when you rebel, God will use it for His glory. This happened with Judas. He betrayed Jesus, but God used that rebellion to purchase redemption.

**Transition:** This story shows that you have a natural bent away from repentance, and it also shows . . .

## 2) God will supernaturally bend you toward repentance.

“And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17).

God sends divine appointments to your address so that you will repent (turn from your sin), so that you will burn the book, so that you will not count the cost of being a Christian and say, “I love money too much.”

A divinely appointment submarine came to pick Jonah up. Some people are just so fascinated with what type of fish swallowed Jonah. I do not think Jonah knew. I think he saw the inside of its belly, but that is about it.

In the first message of this Jonah series, I spent some time dealing with whether this story is a real story or a parable. I am not going to touch it this week, but I am going to spend some more time on that issue next week.

If you are here and say, “I have some real skepticism about this story or some similar stories in the Bible,” I would love to talk through it with you this week.

This is not the first or the last time that God commissioned an animal to accomplish His will. Jesus commissioned a fish to eat a coin the size of a nickel, then commissioned Peter to bait a hook. He told Peter that the first fish that bit would have enough money to pay their temple taxes (Matthew 17:27). And it happened just like that. Most people are either making money or fishing; Peter was making money while fishing. That's my type of fishing!

Fish do not naturally carry money around in their mouths, and birds do not naturally give bread to strangers—unless they have been appointed by God.

Here's the point I want you to see: while you are indifferent, God is sympathetic to you. He will send circumstances in your life that will eventually lead to your repentance.

When God sent the fish, He was not *paying* Jonah back. He was *bringing* Jonah back. When God sends storms in your life, He is not paying you back; He is bringing you back. The fish is not God's judgment; it is God's mercy!

Martin Luther used to speak of God's merciful wrath. That is what we have here.

Psalm 119:67 expresses the sentiment of some of your hearts: "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I keep your word." I like to paraphrase it like this: "Before I was afflicted, I would not repent; but now I repent."

**Transition:** You have a natural bent away from repentance, but God supernaturally bends you toward repentance. In chapter two, we find that . . .

### **1. God loves to hear you sing your repentance.**

Verse 1 of Jonah 2 begins, "Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish."

Finally, Jonah is about to repent. He is about to burn the book; he is about to say, "I'll sell everything if God wants me too. I'm turning from my sin." Jonah is going to express his repentance in a song. He is a song-writing prophet.

There are many different genres of songs. In what genre of music did Jonah write this song? He did not write a . . .

- Classical song – We know this because the fish did not spit him out early. He waited three days.
- Country song – We know this because Jonah did not mention anything about his wife leaving, dog dying, or drinking beer.
- Rap song – Although one rap song in the 90s describes his experience in chapter 2 pretty well: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I take a look at my life and realize there's nothing left."

It is a repentance song. It is a genre unto itself. It transcends styles of music because it is a heart issue that we all face.

Jonah's song begins in verse 2: "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

Here Jonah is saying, "My arms are too short to box with God." I do not think Jonah was kindling a fire inside the whale like the children's books show. He was on the brink of death.

“For **you** cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all **your** waves and **your** billows passed over me” (Jonah 2:3; emphasis added).

Jonah said, “**You** cast me into the deep.” Did God cast Jonah into the sea, or did the crew? He said, “**Your** waves surrounded me . . . **your** billows passed over me.” Were they God’s waves or the Mediterranean Sea’s waves? You must understand that God is sovereign over your storm. He is sovereign over your waves. See God working in every detail of your life—every conversation, every difficulty, and every win.

“Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight [Isn’t that what you wanted, Jonah?]; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple’ ” (Jonah 2:4).

God is allowing Jonah to experience a taste of what the Ninevites will experience in judgment. Repentance always begins with a note of despair, but it ends with a note of relief.

“The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head” (Jonah 2:5).

Verse 5 takes Jonah to the ocean floor. You know, that crew probably thought Jonah died in those waters. They never saw him or the fish. Jonah was half drowned before he was swallowed.

Verse 6–8 continue, “At the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.”

Something mind-blowing happens in verse 8. God equates Jonah’s sin with idolatry. Idolatry was a constant problem in Israel. Jonah had preached against it before, but now he was guilty of it.

Refusing to repent is simple idolatry. The woman who refused to burn the book worshipped what that book could bring (money, comfort, being wanted). The rich man worshipped his bank account or what it could bring him (security).

I am facing an impossible task right at this moment. I am trying to get you to see that your sin is idolatry. No one naturally looks at their sin as idolatry. They think idolatry is bowing before a statue.

An idol is anything you love more than God, trust more than God, or crave more than God.

## 2. Bringing repentance to our door-step.

I want to spend the rest of my time identifying idols (or sin) that we need to repent of. Let's get some help identifying some of these idols that keep us from repenting. Will you fill in this blank . . .

- I'm not going to be happy in the future unless I have \_\_\_\_\_.

That is your idol. You may have said marriage, or a certain status in life, or a particular job, or children, or retirement. Whatever you said, that is your idol.

An idol can be a good thing that you allowed to become a bad thing because you made it a God thing.

Maybe a few questions could help us identify our idols:

- What are you worried about losing?
- What are you bitter about having lost?
- When things are tough, where do you turn for comfort?

Food? Shopping? Do you medicate with plastic? There's nothing an outfit can't fix. A relationship?

Jesus can give you what these things cannot!

That is what I want to tell that woman in MacArthur's story. The arms you were looking for are not in that book. They are God's arms. That is what that wealthy man in Matthew needed to hear: the security you are looking for is not in money; it is in a new Master.

Whatever you have in your mind that you think will make *the* difference is your idol. Your idol could very well be a length of time.

- Lonely, discontented, single people marry and become lonely, discontented, married people.
- Agitated, tired, nearly retired people become agitated, tired, retired people.

If your career success is at the core of who you are, you need to repent of that. If you want everything someone else has, you are really just dissatisfied because God did not give you the idols you were after.

When your family becomes your God, it will show; family activities will trump worship.

When your job becomes your God, it will show: "I do not have time to pray with my

wife! I pay the bills; isn't that enough?"

Would the act of repentance describe your life?

- Are you ever wrong? Do you ever admit it?
- Are you regularly going back and apologizing to people you have sinned against?
- Do you regularly commit the same sin?

Jesus insisted that we have not truly repented of any sin that we are still committing.

Repentance involves a change of mind with a resulting change of action.<sup>3</sup>

Church, please remember: repentance does not save you; God does! We do not worship at the feet of repentance; we worship at the feet of God. Even our tears of repentance need to be washed in the blood of Christ.

### Conclusion

There are two ways to read Jonah. You can see the fallenness of his heart reflect the fallenness of your heart. That is what we have done today. But there is another way to look at Jonah. You could view this book in the light of God's redemptive plan for all the ages.

If you have time this afternoon, go to Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane and compare it with Jonah's prayer in the belly of this fish. That is a great study.

Right now, however, I want to compare Jonah in the boat with Jesus in a boat in Mark 4.

<b>Jonah</b>	<b>Jesus (Mark 4)<sup>4</sup></b>
In a boat.	In a boat.
Overtaken in a storm.	Overtaken in a storm.
The descriptions of both storms are almost identical.	
He was asleep.	He was asleep.
The crew woke both of them and said, "We are going to die."	
A miracle calms the storm.	A miracle calms the storm.

---

<sup>3</sup> Tom Elliff, *A Passion for Prayer: Experiencing Deeper Intimacy with God* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC, 1998), 117.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 61–62.

<p>After the miracle, the crewmembers are more afraid.</p>	<p>After the miracle, the crewmembers are more afraid.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Two almost identical stories—with just one difference.</p> <p>In the midst of the storm, Jonah effectively said to the crew, “There’s only one thing to do. If I perish, you survive. If I die, you will live.” And they threw him into the sea.</p> <p>Which doesn’t happen in Mark’s story. Or does it?</p> <p>In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, “One greater than Jonah is here,” and he is referring to himself: <i>I’m the true Jonah</i>. He meant this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Someday I’m going to calm all storms, still all waves.</li> <li>• I’m going to destroy destruction, break brokenness, kill death.</li> </ul> <p>How can he do that?</p> <p>He can only do it because, when He was on the cross, He was thrown into the ultimate storm, under the ultimate waves, the waves of sin and death. Jesus was thrown into the only storm that can actually sink us—the storm of eternal justice. That storm was not calmed—not until it swept Him away.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everything Jonah did wrong, Jesus did right</li> <li>• Jesus went through the belly of the whale for you.</li> </ul>	

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Eliff, Tom. *A Passion for Prayer: Experiencing Deeper Intimacy with God*. Fort Washington, PA: CLC, 1998.

Keller, Tim. *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus*. New York: Penguin, 2016.

MacArthur, John. *The Superiority of Christ*. Chicago: Moody, 1986.

Walton, John. *Jonah: Bible Study Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.