

Jonah: Wrestling with Grace

Week 3: Jonah 3
November 10, 2013

Good morning/intro stuff

Guests: glad you're here, our vision is connecting people to God and each other, hope you experience a bit of both of those things

Especially if this is your first time ever to church or first time in a long time, glad you're here and hoping you'd come this morning

Vision: hope to be a part of that happening some day all across Chatham County but for today, just glad that you're with us

Praying that today starts a journey for you that ends with you knowing a good God in heaven who loves you

This is week 3 of our 4-week series out of the little book of Jonah in the Old Testament

if you've missed the first couple of weeks you should go to the church web site and watch the video or listen

Because we've had a great start in this book

Jonah is an Old Testament prophet around in Israel about 800 years before Jesus and he gets a call from God to go to his enemies, the Ninevites, and proclaim God's judgment on them.

And the Scriptures say "BUT JONAH" didn't want anything to do with it, he goes in the opposite direction from Nineveh, on a boat toward southern Spain in Tarshish

But God's not done with Jonah yet, he sends a big storm, the ship threatens to break apart, Jonah tells the crew to throw him overboard
he's the reason this storm has come

They finally do so and the storm immediately stops and God sends a fish to swallow Jonah up whole.

Last week, Jonah finally prayed in the belly of the fish, and God hears his prayer and the fish vomited Jonah out into dry land

And this morning, we're going to pick up the story in Jonah 3 where God gives Jonah a second chance.

Well, it's November and that means that Christmas is right around the corner and that means my mother has just about started her yearly pilgrimage of incessant Christmas movie watching.

My mom runs Christmas movies perpetually from around Thanksgiving weekend right on through Christmas day:

3 versions of Christmas Carol, It's a Wonderful Life, and of course the all-time greatest and perhaps the most disputed of all Christmas movies in terms of whether or not it fits in the genre: Die Hard.

Now, what all three of these movies have in common is that all three of the main characters in these movies have serious issues and problems in their lives or their marriages

And all three of them get a re-start of some sort by virtue of ghosts or angels or terrorists,

to become decent human beings or to appreciate the fact that they've had a wonderful life and they shouldn't end it prematurely

or the fact that they're Bruce Willis and just kick some serious butt while at the same time sort of saving his marriage.

Okay, Die Hard doesn't really fit in this category, I just really like the movie!

Our culture and us as a people, we're fascinated and captivated by the second chance, aren't we?

Here's why I think that is—I think that we live in a world and especially as Americans in our culture

that LOVES the idea of lots of choice and the power and freedom to make our own decisions

but lives in denial about the consequences of our actions

One secular college educator that I met would talk about it this way, he simply said "Adults make decisions."

That was kind of his carte blanche description of the fact that grown-ups make decisions and that people had to respect other people's decisions

And to some extent that's true

we have to recognize and embrace that at some point we can't fundamentally change others around us or dictate what kinds of decisions that they make

But there was something missing in this little mantra of his and that is this: "decisions have consequences."

As Americans we're enamored with the idea that we have limitless potential and options and decision-making power

And we've done so little hard and heart work of dealing with the stark reality that decisions have consequences

And so what happens is that we go through out lives making decisions sometimes without any regard to consequences or outcomes for ourselves or for the people around us

And some of you know that's been a part of your story—you look back on a decision you made and you say "that was selfish—I just felt like doing that and didn't think through how it would impact other people,"

some of you are related to a parent or a sibling that's like that

And some of you are currently in denial that you're decisions have had or are currently resulting in serious negative consequences.

But regardless, because Americans like choice and decision-making power but we've done little work in terms of understanding the consequences of those decisions and making wise decisions

And the result is this: we end up with a lot of regrets.

We're a culture and a people with a long history of bad decisions, rush-jobs, arrogant decisions, some result of hubris and pride, some just ignorant, just had no idea what would happen

We're a culture with a confident front, brash decisions, and therefore a lot of skeletons and regrets in the closet.

And because of this, as a culture we love, love, love the story of the second chance.

But even if you're a person who goes against the grain of culture, even if you're a really careful, thoughtful decider

Even if you'd put yourself in the category of the kind of person who really weighs carefully every decision

Even those of you in that category, you've got stuff that you look back on and you regret.

And even those of you in that category, you've probably had some situation where the first time around it didn't quite work out right

Or maybe not just didn't quite work out right, it went terribly, terribly wrong.

And when that happens, when things don't quite work out right those times when you get a second chance, it's incredible, isn't it?

Think about the emotions that come with someone giving you the news that you're getting a second chance to do something that went a little bad or a lot bad!

Relief, exhilaration, gratitude, resolve to make sure it gets done RIGHT this time

We love that feeling, we love the hope and power of that.

Some of you here this morning are here in part because you know you need a second chance, you know you need a new start, a different direction in life

Good news for all of us this morning, the God of the Scriptures loves to give people—loves to give YOU--a second chance.

That's what we see as we open up to the passage today in Jonah 3—if you've got a Bible turn with me there, if not it'll be on the screen, if no Bible at all—pick one up for free at the Resource table!

Jonah's just gotten spit up out of the whale, he's on dry land and cleaned up, here's what happens next:

Jonah 3

1Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,
2"Arise, go to^(A) Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."

3So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.

[box 'the second time']

My friends, hear this good news: God delights to give second chances—Jonah was given a chance to participate in the YES and joy of going to work with his good Father

He said NO to that invitation, but the God of the second chance loved him too much to let him miss out on the privilege of going to work with his good Father

So he gives him a second chance. And in this case it's the exact same thing as the first chance—if you look at how Jonah started, the first call, it reads almost identical!

Jonah 1

1Now the word of the LORD came to^(A) Jonah the son of Amittai,

saying, **2**"Arise, go to^(B) Nineveh, that^(C) great city, and call out against it,^(D) for their evil^[a] has come up before me."

3But Jonah^(E) rose to flee to^(F) Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

These two calls from God are worded the same—the same call to ARISE, go to NINEVEH "THAT GREAT CITY"

every time Nineveh is described by God, he calls it "that great city" meaning it's size and significance, not moral quality

Jonah's job is to go and call out against it, we talked about that week 1, that's God saying NO to their behavior so that they might know God's larger YES to them

Every time God says NO, it's there to serve a larger more important YES—in the second call we get a slightly different command to give the message that God tells Jonah

The invitation is the same, the opportunity is the same, what's different here is Jonah's response

In the second invitation, the author goes to exacting lengths to tell us how specifically Jonah obeys this time.

The command is ARISE and GO and Jonah AROSE and WENT

and if that's not clear enough, the author emphasizes Jonah's obedience all the more clearly by stating he's doing all this ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF THE LORD

Previously in the first invitation, Jonah AROSE TO FLEE FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD, this time, he's arising and going in accordance with the word of the Lord

And all the difference turns on two little words. The trajectory of everything and the goodness of what Jonah does in chapter 3 in contrast to the foolishness he does in chapter 1 all turns on one little word

In Jonah chapter 1, after Jonah gets the call to go to Nineveh, it reads "BUT JONAH"

And here in Jonah 3, after Jonah gets the call to Nineveh, his story reads "SO JONAH"

We talked about this week 1, have you had parts of your own story where you knew what God did or didn't want you to do BUT YOU decided you wanted to go your own way?

Now for some of you, this God thing is completely new

and knowing what God would want for you to do but deliberately going your own way, that's not really a part of your story

And we're just glad you're here and we invite you to listen in on this conversation

But for the rest of us for whom faith and Scripture or church has been a part of our lives, we've got episodes like Jonah, don't we?

God says to do or not do something and our story reads "BUT YOU went the opposite direction"

Let me ask you: How'd that turn out for you?

A couple hundred years ago George MacDonald wrote this: "In whatever man does without God, he must either fail miserably, *or succeed more miserably.*"

Whatever we do that runs from God, we must either fail miserably
or if we achieve some measure of success we've succeeded even more miserably because we've lost God and we think we gotten away with it, gotten something valuable in exchange

Alright, so imagine this for me for a moment—what if in your story, at every one of those places where you ran your own way, what if you replaced that "BUT" with a "SO"

Instead of your story reading "God said BUT you did something different" what if your story read "And God said SO you did exactly as he commanded?"

What if you replaced in your story the "But" with a "So?" How much difference would that have made in your story to this point?

Your story and my story at some key places reads "God said, BUT You."

And there's not much we can do about that now, that's all in God's hands to redeem, not ours to regret

But what if the key to the rest of your and my story for the rest of our lives is simply swapping out these two little words?

What if the most game-changing, most revolutionary thing that could ever happen to you for the rest of your life wasn't
hitting the lottery,
wasn't some big job change,
not some big motivational speaker or some big new diet or exercise routine
not suddenly being discovered by a talent agent because they heard you singing in the car to the radio

All those things might be helpful and good and if you got discovered by a talent agent and made it big, please don't forget us little people.

But what if the thing that would do the most good in your life was this small, simple, short word exchange: trading out, swapping out the 'but' for the 'so'

You know what steers a ship? A rudder. The rudder is always much smaller than the rest of the ship.

I want to suggest to you that the direction of your life is basically dictated and decided by which of these two small rudders you choose at each step all along the way.

And I want to invite you to consider that the key to the direction of your life for the rest of your life lies right here with these two little words.

Our stories can either read "God said BUT " or "God said SO"
and on the other side of those little words of "But" or "So" lies two completely different stories, two very different outcomes, two very different paths

In Jonah's story, his "BUT JONAH" path led to fleeing from God's presence and the resulting discipline and pain

But here in Jonah 3, when his story reads not "BUT JONAH" but "SO JONAH" it leads him to a very different outcome.

Now that outcome isn't a cake-walk, is it? "Hey Jonah, go to your enemies and tell them that I'm going to blow them up."

If you were Jonah, do you think you'd be getting the welcome wagon from the Ninevites?

Jonah might get killed here—literally might get killed. But death with God and in God's presence is vastly superior to a shell of a life without him.

So Jonah goes. Let's see what happens.

Now^(B) Nineveh was an exceedingly great city,^[a] three days' journey in breadth.^[b] **4**Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

5^(C) And the people of Nineveh believed God.^(D) They called for a fast and^(E) put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

When I worked with students at UNC, there's this place at the center of campus called the Pit

And regularly in the pit there would be a cast of characters who were infamously referred to as "the Pit Preachers"

And these guys come through and they preach at students during the middle of the day when students are hanging out or passing by

And some of them are actually preaching decent stuff and others of them are just basically being as shocking and angry and judgmental as possible and telling everyone that they're going to hell for wearing jeans or even just going to college

But basically whoever's in the pit doing the preaching, there's just two responses: a handful of folks gather around and like to argue and fight with them

But the vast majority of the people just ignore them.

But here, Jonah goes and Nineveh is a great big city and he starts to walk through the city and across the city crying out against it a message that sounds very much like a pit preacher

And certainly this is a summary statement, my guess is that he said much more than this we just don't have all of what he says recorded here

And he's walking this city probably multiple times over many days

But instead of the people arguing and fighting with him or simply ignoring him, the Scripture says the people believed God.

And not just the people, here's how the rest of it unfolds:

6The word reached^[c] the king of Nineveh, and^(E) he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth,^(G) and sat in ashes.

So this is the king, and he takes on the standard activities of someone who's repentant, sorry, changing his ways

7And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh,^(H) "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor^(I) beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, **8**but let man and^(J) beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God.^(K) Let everyone turn from his evil way and from^(L) the violence that is in his hands. **9**^(M) Who knows? God may turn and

relent^(N) and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

10When God saw what they did,^(O) how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

One of my regular practices that I commit myself to doing is regularly listening to great speakers and teachers so that I might grow as a speaker and teacher

And this past week in my small group one couple was sharing about how they became Christians as adults at a Billy Graham crusade back in the 70's

If you're not familiar with Billy Graham, for the better part of the 20th century he was a traveling speaker and preacher and he'd preach to football stadiums full of people

And literally millions of people have responded to the invitation to trust in Jesus, walk with Jesus through his incredible ministry

In terms of simply people coming to initial faith in Christ, he's like one of the top people in all of history in terms of sheer numbers of people who he's touched

So these folks are one of the millions of people whose lives were dramatically changed through a Billy Graham experience

And I half-joked that I didn't listen to Billy Graham sermons because there's nothing to learn from him.

Because if you ever listen to or have heard Billy Graham speak, he doesn't do or say anything all that crazy or cool!

He's super simple, super clear, he just presents the good news that God has forgiven us our sins in Jesus and invites us into forgiveness and life with him

And then he says at the end of this very simple, very un-sophisticated sermon does anyone want to respond to this message

And the Spirit of God just moves and people respond by the thousands upon thousands

He is a man of profound integrity and depth and when he speaks, the Spirit of God just moves and life-change happens.

Well here, Jonah gets a level of response that would make Billy Graham jealous—I don't know if even Billy Graham has ever gotten cattle to repent!

Everyone in Nineveh, from the least to the king to the cattle, responds favorably to Jonah's message

Even Jesus doesn't get this kind of response!

Now if Jonah wasn't crazy enough with the big fish eating him whole thing, this certainly seems to be piling on!

How can we believe that a whole city of people actually listened to this crazy pit-preacher like guy, who's a foreigner and at that time they were even more distrustful of foreigners than we are today

And there are a couple of different explanations that have been trotted out as to how or why the people of Nineveh respond so quickly and so universally favorably toward Jonah's message

1. Record of a solar eclipse around this time—IF it occurred at the same time Jonah was walking through Nineveh, it would have certainly freaked them out and they probably would have done anything he'd said.
2. The Ninevites had a pantheon of gods and they were appeasing them all the time in all sorts of ways.

If they'd had a bad crop or needed rain or were about to set out for war or had an enemy on their doorstep, they'd do just about anything for any god to get that god's favor and help

So perhaps they just lumped Jonah's God in with the rest of their gods and said "let's appease this god, too!"

The force of this argument is stronger when you see that the word used for "God" here in relation to the Ninevites is the generic word for God, that could be used by anybody

The Israelites had a name that only they used to describe God and that was YAHWEH, so whenever you see the word LORD written in capital letters, that's that specific word "YAHWEH" being translated

Earlier when the sailors make sacrifices, in Jonah 1 as they have a moment of conversion, they make sacrifices and pray to YAHWEH

But here, these people only respond to "GOD" a more generic term

3. The Spirit of God moved, brings conviction, just like at a Billy Graham crusade, perhaps even using a solar eclipse or using the ninevites desires to appease the gods

Nothing that we can explain, it just happens as God's Spirit moves

These are not mutually exclusive options, by the way, all three of these could be in play at any given moment

And it's not like these people aren't generally aware that they have issues—look again at the king's edict:

Let everyone turn from his evil way and from^(L) the violence that is in his hands.

These people know that they're a violent people and that they act wickedly, they're not oblivious to it

It's like a drug dealer who specializes in selling to junior high kids—they know what they're doing is wrong, but they might need some sort of external pressure or force to get them to change

The incredible and immediate response of the people is completely consistent with the rest of the book

All throughout Jonah, everyone and everything is responsive to God: the sailors pray, the captain, wakes Jonah up, the storm obeys God, the fish obeys God, the people of Nineveh who don't know God really, they obey God

The only one who's reluctant to obey God is Jonah.

And here Jonah is a type and a message for Israel at this time who is also running from God and reluctant to obey Him

But not only for Israel, he's a type for you and me, all of us who waste many hours of our lives reluctant to obey the Lord.

Jonah is given a second chance to obey God, the Ninevites are given an explicit chance to obey God

And both of them here in this passage repent from their former ways. Both of them turn away from running from God and run toward him instead.

These are both great pictures of REPENTANCE.

That's a church-y sounding word, so let me give you a clear definition of repentance: to change your mind and your actions in line with God's "YES" to us in Christ Jesus.

In the New Testament the word repentance in the Greek literally means “to change your mind”

There’s a critical internal-world component where you thought one way about yourself, about God, about what you were doing and where you were headed

BUT NOW we meet God and his grace and discipline and love and we think differently about all those things

Last week we talked about idols

about how our hearts generate idols all the time, thinking that we’ll find life in work or success or control or independence or money or whatever else it is that our hearts put their confidence in.

Repenting of those idols is part just recognizing the futility of looking to those things for our lives

Last week I told you how my childhood dream of being a wide receiver for the Dallas Cowboys was an indicator of one of the core idols I’ve struggled with: the applause and approval of people

Part of me repenting was realizing and naming the simple reality that when I was clinging to that idol, it was never satisfying.

People would tell me nice things but it was never enough. I always needed more and more approval, more applause.

It was like drinking salt water—it promised to quench a need or desire I had and it looked on the outside like it would, but it never actually fulfilled it.

So at some point internally—in my head and my heart—I just realized that clinging onto this idol wasn’t going to satisfy me

And the answer wasn’t to simply bounce over to another idol like money or success—none of the pantheons of the gods offered to me by my culture was ever going to satisfy

Only the real God of the universe could fill the God-shaped void in my life, everything else was just wasn’t big enough.

The God-shaped void was nearly infinite and all these little idols were just these little specks that got swallowed up immediately.

I was starving for God and got one animal cracker instead—nothing wrong with an animal cracker, it’s cute and nice and tastes like slightly sweet cardboard

If you don't take it too seriously or try to actually get any nourishment out of it, an animal cracker is fine

But if you're actually hungry and you actually want a real meal, don't try to make one out of animal crackers

My friends, we try to take our hunger for a good and perfect loving God and fill it with the animal crackers of success, control, independence, or the job or the kids or the money

And God says, "I've got a full meal ready to meet that hunger, if you'll just stop nibbling on animal crackers and come and join this feast."

We need an infinite God to fill the near-infinite God-shaped void in our lives. Part of the biblical understanding of repentance is simply embracing that truth in our hearts and minds.

But just thinking differently isn't the full extent of repentance, is it? Jonah doesn't just think sort of theoretically about God and his call to go to Nineveh

He doesn't just think about God's call differently, he responds differently

There's a change of direction and movement required.

In my small group this week one woman shared that her preschool aged nephew who knew better

got into the q-tips he knew he wasn't supposed to play with
put them deep into his ears and burst his ear drums

Mom said "No playing with Qtips"—that was "NO" that served the larger "YES"

Her son did not believe his mother, which as any mother will tell you is 90% of the world's problems

He did not believe his mother, he disobeyed, and he got bloody ears as a result.

So certainly he understands much better now why his mother said "no playing with qtips"

But hopefully that's not just theory—hopefully that kid will never do what he did again—hopefully that kid will change his actions, not just understand his mom better

That's repentance: I thought and acted one way previously, but now there's both the internal world of the heart and mind and affections and thoughts and movement and action

The problem for many of us and in my life is that I am so habituated to putting q-tips deep into my ears and re-bursting my ear drums.

In my own life I regularly find myself seeing my idols, trying to drop them, but then I find myself re-clinging to them all over again, sometimes in shocking or surprising ways—that happen to anyone this week?

You put down your idol here on Sunday morning and find yourself clinging to it again on Monday or Tuesday?

I was praying for you last week that the Lord would sever the connections between you and your idols, between me and my idols

But the reality is that our idol-worshipping is habitual for many of us and so we have to remind ourselves and practice over and over again that nothing else will work but God

and that Jesus IS THE faithful guide and bridge and way to get me into the presence of our good Father

That's why many of the great thinkers throughout the centuries have said that the Christian life is primarily from start to finish a life of repentance.

We are constantly chasing down the wrong gods, constantly clinging to our idols, and one of the core transactions between us and God is to come before him regularly and once again acknowledge and name our idols and once again lay them at his feet.

And we can get so discouraged, in that process, can't we? Ever have this feeling that we should be over something by now

Have you ever been shocked or appalled or overwhelmed or annoyed at something that you said or did?

I've got good news and bad news for you: God is never shocked when we sin. He's never surprised, it never catches him off guard when we do something ridiculous!

We're surprised because we tend to over-estimate our own moral goodness and then are appalled when we don't live up to our self-illusion

But God knows you, and he loves you, and he's under no illusions as to your basic goodness.

You are made in God's image, and God loves you.

But sin has tainted and touched every single bit of your goodness, and so while we are occasionally shocked or surprised by what comes out of our mouths or the actions we or others around us take

God never is. Of course he's grieved, he doesn't delight in our sinfulness, but he's never shocked.

Jesus paid for that sin on the cross, he knew that sin and your sin patterns before you were born!

When we trust in Christ, we are both exposed by him and we are accepted by him. The very nature of trusting in Christ is that Jesus had to do something that we could not do for ourselves.

He forgives us of our sins, he cleanses us and makes us righteous because we don't have any right-ness of our own to make or offer

And so we're accepted and loved by grace, not by our religious efforts! There's a huge difference between God's grace and religion

And it looks like this:

I was talking with a student one day a number of years ago and we were having a conversation that I've had many times over the years

That basically at the end of our lives there's these scales—on one side is the good stuff I've done, on the other side is the bad stuff I've done
and you'd just better hope that the good outweighs the bad and if so it'll be okay

That's religion. It's all about us doing enough good for God to find us acceptable

If that's true, if that's how God really works, then discovering and seeing your sin is the worst possible thing because you've just discovered another weight on the negative side of the scale

If that's true, seeing your sin is completely threatening and exhausting because your entire hope for the verdict on your life is all based on you getting rid of that negative weight.

If that's true then repentance is an anxious and fearful prospect and you SHOULD kick yourself, you better be kicking yourself
because if you don't get your act together you are in for a very unpleasant eternity option.

And so repentance looks like a striving, anxious, working off this sin and this guilt so that my scale tips back in the positive direction

But that's religion, that's not Christianity, that's not the good news of Jesus.

The good news of Jesus is that God SEES us—sees every single bit of us

And he knows that every single thing we do to some degree is tainted by sin, knows that if we actually stacked the weights every single one of us would lose

There's no drama there—SPOILER ALERT: the Scripture makes it abundantly clear, not a one of us passes that test.

If you're holding your breath waiting for the big decision, here's the verdict on your life and my life: we're guilty

So God knows that, sees that we all lose in the game of scales, so what he does in Jesus is he takes all our sin upon himself, so that it's no longer stacked against us on our scale.

Jesus buys ALL the sin off of our scale and puts it on himself and dies with it so that it's not counted against us any more.

Every single thing that you and I have ever done wrong has been bought with the body and blood of Jesus

And so seeing our sin in light of the gospel, because of the gospel, is not some anxiety producing horror

It is another cause for celebration: here is yet ANOTHER THING that Jesus has ALREADY PAID FOR! Thank you for going through all that suffering to buy this sin off my scale!

And repentance now is simply acknowledging that this thing, whatever it is, has been bought by Jesus
rather than clinging to it and trying to get life out of it,
we repent by handing it over to him, thanking him for forgiving us this thing,

And asking him to lead us into a life that's free of our idols and sins and free to enjoy him and follow him without tripping over this sin over and over again

That's gospel repentance—it's not anxious, it's not self-condemning, it's certainly humbling but it's joyful
our confidence and our hope is in Jesus for our past, present and future, he paid for all of it, so we're free to be honest about our sin and our brokenness

Because our hope isn't rooted in ourselves or our performance, it's rooted in the gospel of Jesus, what he has done for us—his forgiveness already offered and extended

In Christ Jesus, the outcome of and verdict on your life is not hanging on how good you are; the outcome of your life is decided by the grace of God who bought all the sin from your side of the scale

God's grace frees us to be brutally honest with him and ourselves about the junk inside our hearts and in our lives without it overwhelming us

He already sees it, knows it, and is never surprised by it. He has already seen it, already knew it, and already paid for it.

Religious repentance puts a whole lot on us to get our acts together and it's a lot about our moral performance—it's anxious, fearful, and fretting

Christian repentance puts the emphasis on what Christ has already done for us, freeing us to see our sin for what it is
but even more, to see the infinite grace and love and power of God poured out on the cross for what THAT is

And so God never, ever tires of our confession and repentance—even if it's the same thing over and over again.

Every time we acknowledge our sin and turn away from it, it removes something that's blocking you from him and brings us one step closer to him

And that's what this whole thing is all about—God so desired to have you for his child, he sends his Son to die on the cross so that you might be adopted into his family

Our sin threatened to undo us and permanently separate us.

Our attempts at working that sin off, trying to balance the scales, just won't work because even our best attempts at doing good stuff are done with mixed motives of pride and self-righteousness

We can't do enough good to offset all the ways that our hearts worship other things

And so Jesus pays with his life to buy back his children by taking that sin off your scale and putting it onto himself.

He absorbs our sin, takes away the sins of the world.

And so the invitation to repent is yet another opportunity for us to rejoice in the great love of our good Father.

Not to work harder, although work is involved, but rather to trust more deeply, more fully in the incredible and infinite love of our good Father in heaven and in Jesus Christ his Son who bled, died, and rose again, for us and our salvation.

We're going to move into a time where we're creating some space for you to do business with the Lord

To open up your heart and mind to the Lord and to repent—which just means to name your sin, decide and name the reality that it's not giving you the life you want anyway

And gladly and with great joy offer that up to Jesus and pray for him to lead you in his way

A life that is stitched together with the "SO" rather than the "BUT" and a life that is rich with joy and purpose and clarity and freedom

The confidence that comes with the good news that what you do matters, but ultimately what God has done for you matters even more.

PRAY

And some of us wonder if God can or will forgive us again for this same thing.

Repentance is not about an angry God shouting at you to stop doing something that you really want to do, it's about pulling you away from something that's self-destructive

It's saying YES to God's YES to you in Jesus—trusting his good YES and walking in that direction

God sends a messenger to Nineveh with a warning. It was not an empty threat, it was the real consequence of their sin if they continued in it.

The people heed that warning. And so God acts in accordance with their faithful response to his warning—they repent

And when the Lord sees what the Ninevites do, here's how he responds:

10When God saw what they did, (O) how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

When I was just out of college and doing some initial theological study

I was intrigued with one of the big and enduring questions throughout history

Which is: how much of what we do is pre-decided by God and how much power or ability do we have to impact and shape our own future and the world around us and even God and his decisions?

And if it's a scale of 1-10, with 10 being God decided I should wear this exact shirt today

and a 1 being God just sort of wound up the clock, kicked the world off and then pretty much has left it alone kind of watching from a distance

I was probably a 9. I thought that God pretty much had pre-decided just about everything—he was sovereign, all powerful, and he pretty much scripted this whole thing out.

But then I came across passages like this.

And I came across passages where Jesus says to his disciples when they can't cast out a demon that this kind of healing can only happen through prayer and fasting.

And I saw how God seems to have delighted to create a universe where he is the ultimate authority and power over every single thing

And yet he graciously has invited us to share in a small piece in our little sphere of influence of what it means that we can affect change or have impact

Here, God sees the repentance of the ninevites and he says "I'm not going to destroy this city because of their response to the message."

I mean, that's why you go through the trouble to send a warning, isn't it?

If all God really wanted to do was to blow the place up, he would have just blown the place up and not bothered to send Jonah who was a pain to work with on this project anyway!

God sends Jonah because as he says later: Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? (Ezekial 18:23)

I want to suggest this kind of relationship between OUR PRAYERS/OBEDIENCE/REPENTANCE and GOD'S ACTIVITY AND INTERVENTION

1. God has designed the universe such that our prayers/action in response to God and God's activity are related like the ways that jazz musicians who are jamming together who are good relate

That what one does affects the other one, there is a back and forth, and it's got some rules to it—you're in the same key, you're responding sort of in the moment but within a relationship between the two instruments

2. There is one-to-one causality in the spiritual world between our prayers/obedience/repentance and God's action

Every prayer gets an answer: it's either yes, no, or wait.

Every request for forgiveness in