

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



January 5, 2014

A Lesson in Repentance

Many people think they have repented, when they don't have the foggiest idea what real repentance is. Jesus points us to an example of repentance that clarifies the subject.

“The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here” (Matt. 12:41).

--◇--

Jesus says that the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. Yet if we go back and read the book of Jonah, we find that the word “repent” is not found anywhere in the story. What happened that led Jesus to see repentance in these people?

Recall that Jonah was sent by God to Nineveh to preach a message of judgment (“cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me,” 1:2). After a slight detour involving a big fish, Jonah delivered God's message in the great city: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:4).

Jonah's preaching got results: “The people of Nineveh believed God” and “cried mightily to God” (3:5, 8). Even Nineveh's king humbled himself in sackcloth and fasting, and ordered his subjects to “every one turn from his evil

way and from the violence that is in his hands” (3:8). The people took this message to heart, for “God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it” (3:10).

Note the sequence of events: the people *believed God*, they *expressed remorse for their sins*, and they *turned from their evil ways*. All three of these elements combined to make up what Jesus called “repentance.”

What many people call “repentance” does not fit this Biblical model. For example, some people—after getting burned yet again by the destructive effects of their conduct—change their lives only out of a desire for self-preservation. God had nothing to do with their reformation. That's not repentance.

Or consider the rowdy young man who cleans up his act and “gets religion” in order to win his girlfriend. Has he repented? Not necessarily. He may have turned from his evil ways, but if the change was motivated by something other than faith in God and grief for his

sins, the changed life won't last long. (And his girlfriend will find out soon enough after she marries him.)

On the other hand, there are those people who sincerely believe in God and are so, so sorry for their sins—but not enough to give them up. They remain mired in a web of fleshly appetites and lazy indifference to what God wants them to be. Their weak efforts to turn their lives around are ineffective and short-lived. Repentance has not yet taken hold in these people.

If we truly desire to repent, the same three elements that turned the people of Nineveh around must operate in our lives: *First*, we must cast ourselves completely on God's mercy, recognizing Him as our Creator and Judge; *second*, we must agonize over the imperfections that mar our lives; and *third*, we must harness every fiber of our being to actually change our behavior.

One final thought: Repentance is not a one-time event. It should be an ongoing process throughout our lives, always driving us closer to what God wants us to be.

— David King