

The Scandal of Mercy

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Date: 16 July 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, in the month of July, we have been in a four-week series looking at the book and the story of Jonah. Jonah is this short but wonderful story of this minor prophet in the Old Testament, and it's a story about a man and a prophet who runs away from God.

He runs away from God in direct disobedience to his word, but nonetheless, God runs after him. And he ends up having a deep encounter with God's power and his mercy and his grace by being rescued at the bottom of the sea in the belly of a great fish.

And that's what we've looked at the first two weeks. And this powerful experience of God's mercy and grace takes Jonah on both an inward journey and an outward journey.

Last week, we looked at chapter two. We looked at Jonah's prayer in the belly of the great fish, and we looked at Jonah's deep inward journey of spiritual transformation.

And in the second half of the story in chapters three and four is where we see Jonah's outward journey. And we can talk about Jonah's outward journey like this, that it's the process of how God's grace changes Jonah's perspective toward the people of Nineveh, toward people who would typically be his ethnic and political and national enemies and Israel's enemies as well.

[1 : 33] And this, in many ways, is the outward journey that all of us who claim to be followers of Jesus have to go on. It's the outward journey of loving our neighbors.

It's the outward journey of even learning how to love even our enemies. And so we're going to look at part one today of Jonah's outward journey in chapter three, and we're going to look at this in three parts.

We're going to look at Nineveh's repentance, Jonah's anger, and God's mercy. Nineveh's repentance, Jonah's anger, and God's mercy. And do we have any elementary schoolers here this morning?

Raise your hand if you're in elementary school. All right, great. You should have received maybe some pieces of paper and some colored pencils on the way in. If not, there's some in the back for you if you'd like to go pick those up.

And on the third page, there should be a space for you to draw a picture. And so if you'd like to draw a picture in the middle of a sermon, I'm going to give you a picture to draw. And here it is. Are you ready? I want you to draw a picture of a bad guy.

[2 : 37] And this could be a picture of a villain from a superhero story that you know, or some other character from some other story that you know. But here's the twist. I want you to draw a picture of a bad guy.

And I want you to draw a picture of Jesus changing the bad guy's heart. All right? Can you do that for me? And again, if you draw it, I want you to show it to me after the service, okay?

Hope to see lots of good pictures. So first of all, we're going to look at Nineveh's repentance. In verses one through three, we see that the Lord commissions Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh, and he uses almost virtually the same language that he does in chapter one, verse one.

Almost as if to say, all right, take two, same assignment. Let's do this. Let's try this again. Verses one through three, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

And this time, Jonah obeys and heads straight for Nineveh. And verse four says that once he arrives, he begins preaching the message that the Lord had given him.

[3 : 43] And what is that message? We see it in verse four. He says, yet 40 days, and Nineveh will be overthrown. Maybe not the most fun sermon you've ever heard in your life.

This is a message of impending divine judgment. And I think this is a hard message for us to hear in our culture. We don't enjoy thinking about messages of divine judgment very much in our culture.

We prefer a God of love to a God of justice and wrath. But it's important to see here that God's justice here, his judgment here, isn't arbitrary.

We know from chapter one, and also we know from the prophet Nahum, and we also know from history that Nineveh was a violent and cruel city where lots of evil things were done, where lots of injustice happens.

And so God, being God, has a right to judge them and to bring them justice for their evil and wickedness. And also, this message of God's justice is also meant to eventually, hopefully, lead Nineveh towards flourishing.

[4 : 52] God is a God of justice, but he's also a God of mercy. And that's why he sends Jonah, because he wants to give Nineveh an opportunity to repent.

He wants to give them an opportunity to change. So how do they respond? Well, we can think about this in two ways, that Nineveh's response is they respond faster than Jonah does to God's word, and they respond deeper than Jonah does to God's word.

They respond faster to Jonah, faster than Jonah does to his word. As we saw in chapters one and two, God's word comes to Jonah, and Jonah is pretty slow to respond to God's word, as we see in chapters one and two.

But God's word comes to Nineveh in chapter three, verse four, and they respond in the very next verse, in verse five. And the people of Nineveh believed God, and they called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them.

They respond more immediately, and they respond more deeply than Jonah did. Their whole society was transformed by this response to the word of God.

[6 : 04] In verses six through nine, we see that the king of Nineveh responds in repentance and that he leads the entire city to turn from their evil and injustice, to fast and to pray and to put on sackcloth and ashes.

These were ancient ways of practicing self-denial to demonstrate the sincerity of your repentance. And Nineveh's repentance is exemplary in many ways in the entire breadth of the story of the Old Testament.

There's only a couple times in the Old Testament story where Israel as a nation demonstrated this kind of societal transformation and corporate repentance. And this is actually the point that Jesus is making in Matthew chapter 12 to the religious people of his own day.

And he's saying the people of Nineveh have responded more faithfully to God's word than you're responding right now because they repented at Jonah's preaching. And somebody who ranks above Jonah is here and that's me.

And the people of Jonah are more faithfully responding to God's word than you are. And so if you want to know how God was really and wholeheartedly to him, all you have to do is look at verse 10.

[7 : 24] In verse 10, God says, when God saw what they did, 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.

He has mercy. He relents. He has compassion. And this is what God does for all people who repent sincerely and wholeheartedly before him.

Regardless of what you've done, regardless of who you've been, regardless of how far you've run, regardless of how deeply you've sinned, regardless of how ashamed you are, God is a God of mercy and forgiveness.

And this is great news if you are a sinner, if you are someone who is in need of mercy. But if you think that God's mercy and his forgiveness and his love are something that you earn in some way, then this is a scandal.

This is a scandal. And this is what happens to Jonah. How does Jordan respond? Not well. He doesn't respond well. So that's the second thing we're going to look at is Jonah's anger.

[8 : 47] Chapter four, verses one through three. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly. And he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, oh, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish. For I knew that you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

And here is specifically why we see from Jonah himself why he runs from God in chapter one.

Because he could not imagine the possibility that people, like the people of Nineveh, his national and ethnic and political and cultural enemies could receive the same kind of mercy, the same kind

of compassion from God that he had.

God's mercy to his enemies is an absolute scandal to Jonah. And it makes him incredibly outraged. And we see two parts of Jonah's anger here in chapter four.

We see the irony of Jonah's anger and we see the depth of his anger. The irony of Jonah's anger is not difficult to see. Is it? Especially if we've read chapters one and two.

[10:01] He's angry that God has shown mercy to a disobedient people. Directly after God has shown mercy to him for being disobedient to him and running away from him.

He says, I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And this is a direct reference for ways that God had revealed himself in Exodus and other places throughout the Old Testament.

This is, these are specific ways that God had revealed himself in a personal way. And Jonah says, I knew this is what you were really like. I knew this is what you were like.

And the perspective that we have as readers of this story is that we are able to see something clearly that Jonah couldn't see, that he was blind to, which is, yeah.

Duh, Jonah. Like, hello? Like, it's because God is like this that he saved you from the bottom of the sea. Not too long ago. Remember this whole thing?

[11:06] Remember the storm? Remember the boat? Remember how you were on the boat?

Everyone was about to drown. You realized that you were the reason for the storm and everyone's life was at stake. And so you plunged yourself in the bottom of the sea.

And as you were headed down to the depths of the sea and seaweed was wrapped around your head and you were moments away from death, that God rescued you, which some large marine creature, and you were in his belly for three days.

Do you remember this, Jonah? Do you remember that God showed you mercy? How can you be angry at God for showing mercy to Nineveh when he has also shown you miraculous mercy?

So we see the irony of Jonah's anger, but we also see the depth of Jonah's anger. Jonah is so angry that God is merciful to Nineveh that he would rather die.

And he asked the Lord in verse three to take his life. Old Testament scholar Douglas Stewart puts it this way. He says, And that's because even though Jonah had a miraculous experience of God's mercy and salvation, that there were still parts of his heart that remain unchanged by it.

[12:29] And that is true for all of us who've experienced God's mercy and grace and salvation. Maybe perhaps we've experienced powerful, maybe even miraculous or supernatural encounters with God.

And yet, there is still both an inward journey and an outward journey that we all have to go on in the Christian life because there are still parts of our hearts that remain unchanged by his grace and by his mercy.

Because like Jonah, all of us still have idols. We still have functional saviors in our hearts. And that's part of what we looked at last week in chapter two. Jonah had turned a good thing into an ultimate thing.

He had turned love for his tribe into... Jonah's love for his tribe had become greater than his love for God. He had turned his love for his nation and his culture and his country into an idol of tribalism and nationalism.

And this is why as we talk about idols and things like functional saviors, we're not just talking about our personal relationship with God and what's going on internally.

[13:47] Our idols and our functional saviors also have implications for our relationships with our neighbors. Because ultimately, like what we see here with Jonah, a pattern of worshiping idols and functional saviors in our lives will ultimately lead us to dehumanize our neighbors.

And they will ultimately dehumanize us. And so a question that I think Jonah 3 forces us to ask this morning is, where is there a hint of tribalism in your own heart?

Who for you are those people? Who are people that if they flourished and succeeded, you would grow angry and bitter and outraged and perhaps not even want to live?

Maybe it's an individual. Maybe it's a kid who bullies other kids at school. Maybe it's a group of people.

Maybe it's people in red America. Maybe it's people in blue America. Maybe it's liberals. Maybe it's conservatives. Maybe it's those kinds of Christians.

[15:02] Maybe it's that kind of church. Maybe like Jonah, it is a people of different culture, people of a different race or ethnicity or nationality. Maybe it's people who talk about race too much.

Maybe it's people who don't talk about race enough. Maybe it's people who watch Fox News.

Maybe it's people who watch MSNBC. Maybe it's people who listen to mainstream media.

Maybe it's people who don't listen to mainstream media. Maybe it's all of those people who got on to Ticketmaster and bought all the Taylor Swift tickets before they sold out and therefore you couldn't get the ticket to this Taylor Swift concert.

Whoever it is, all of us have those people that if they were to flourish, if they were to succeed, maybe even if they were to repent and enter into a relationship with God, it would cause us to be outraged.

It would cause us to be angry. And that's because to some degree, even those of us who follow Jesus, to some degree, all of us have tribalistic hearts like Jonah.

[16:15] And learning to uproot our idols, especially the idols of tribalism, learning to uproot those functional saviors is part of the outward journey that every Christian has to go on.

It's the outward journey of learning how to love our neighbors and especially learning how to love our enemies. How do we do that? How do we do that in, especially even in an incredibly divided and politically polarized current cultural moment?

How do we begin the journey of loving those people? How do we overcome our own tribalism? How do we dethrone the idol of tribalism in our own hearts?

We have to see God's mercy. We have to see God's mercy. And that's the final thing that we see.

Two ways that God's mercy should have changed Jonah and how they can change us.

Two ways that God's mercy should have changed Jonah and how they can change us. First of all, God's mercy helps us to see the image of God in those people.

[17:25] It helps us to see the image of God in those people. The image of God is this rich foundational theological principle that we are all glorious ruins. If you were to go to any part of the world like Europe or some other place where there's ruins of old ancient castles, you often see something that is run down and broken and falling apart and not what it used to be.

And yet, there is often an irreducible glory and beauty that has still remained, that's still there. And Christian theology holds both of these things together, that human beings are fallen and broken and ruined by sin, yes, but also still gloriously and beautifully created in God's image.

As the moon reflects the light of the sun, every human being reflects the light of God's nature, his goodness, his beauty, and every person has dignity and value and worth inherently.

And this was something that Jonah failed to see. That though Nineveh was a city full of grievous injustice, that in Nineveh were men and women and children, all made in God's image.

And that is why God was moved to show them mercy and compassion. And it's why they had the capacity to repent. And it's why they had the capacity to receive mercy from God through repentance.

[18:57] One time at a public forum event somewhere downtown in DC, I heard Russell Moore, who's the editor-in-chief of Christianity Today, say something profound about the image of God that I've never forgotten.

And Russell Moore said, one of the best things that we have to offer the world is our demonology. Which sounds kind of funny, but it's the reality that we actually believe in real things such as angels and demons.

And a lot of people think that's irrational and crazy and weird and unscientific, but it's practically something that our world needs. That because we believe demons are real, because we believe that Satan's real, we should never demonize other people.

People made in God's image. No matter how much we might disagree with somebody, no matter how much we might be tempted to despise somebody or even hate them, we should never treat them as less than human, because they're still made in God's image.

And even people guilty of the most heinous sins, the Hitlers and the Stalins of the world, still have the imprint of the irreducible glory of God's image.

[20:14] And therefore, they have the opportunity to repent from their sin and to receive God's mercy. Now, this doesn't mean that we downplay or ignore somebody's grievous acts of sin or injustice.

Of course not. But it also doesn't mean that we ignore the glory of the image of God in them. The image of God means that all people, even those people, are capable of receiving God's mercy through repentance and having the same relationship with God that we do.

And if we really think about it, this is a scandal to some degree to all of us. Because if we think hard enough, there are some people that we would never wanna see flourish, that we would never wanna see experience God's mercy.

But this is what Jonah, the story of Jonah, and this is what scripture teaches. So the mercy of God helps us to see the image of God in those people. And secondly, the mercy of God helps us to remember that we are those people.

That we are those people. In chapter four, verse four, God asks Jonah a question that he asks all of us. And he says, do you have a right to be angry?

[21 : 30] Do you have a right to be angry when those people flourish? And it's a rhetorical question because the answer is obvious and the answer is no.

We don't have a right to be angry because in relationship to God, we are those people. We're the unrighteous ones. We're the unjust ones. We're the people who don't see things the right way.

We're the people with the wrong opinions, who read the wrong news articles, who use the wrong words, who post the wrong things on social media. We're what's wrong with our city.

We're what's wrong with our country. We're what's wrong with our world. We are wholly undeserving of mercy. And yet, in Jesus Christ, God has showed us mercy.

Jesus, someone who not only loved his enemies, but died for them. In Romans chapter five, the apostle Paul says, very rarely in the most extreme cases would somebody consider dying for a moral, good, righteous person.

[22 : 36] But God demonstrates his own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, that while we were still God's enemies, Christ died for us.

He showed us mercy. And not only that, but in Jesus, God is remaking humanity into a new family of people from every tribe and people and tongue and nation.

And political persuasion and skin color and age group and gender and socioeconomic level where the image of God is being restored and renewed and beautified.

where even though we may have nothing in common, in another sense, we have everything in common because we're all those people.

We're all undeserving of God's mercy. And yet, in Jesus, God has showed us mercy. C.S. Lewis says, to be a Christian is to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

[23 : 44] The gospel at its heart is a scandal. It's a scandal of God's mercy, but it's the only thing that has the power to overcome the tribalism in our hearts at the deepest level.

The pastor of the church that I attended in St. Louis, Greg Johnson, loved to tell the story of Wade Watts and Johnny Lee Clary. And this is the way that he tells the story.

Reverend Wade Watts and Johnny Lee Clary first met at a debate at a radio talk show in Oklahoma City in 1979 when Reverend Watts, a local pastor, was the state leader in Oklahoma of the NAACP.

And Johnny Lee Clary was the grand dragon of the Oklahoma Ku Klux Klan. And so you can imagine how the debate on that radio talk show went. When Clary arrived, Reverend Watts reached out his hand and he shook his hand and he said, hey, Johnny, great to meet you.

But Clary pulled back his hand in disgust and looked at his hand. And Reverend Watts looked at him and he said, don't worry, Johnny. It doesn't rub off. Following the debate, Watts started to get anonymous phone calls at his home.

[24 : 59] There'd be threats, there'd be racist comments made, there'd be curses and warnings, even death threats, and they would all be disguised in this mysterious, anonymous voice. But every time that Reverend Watts would get one of these calls, he would say, well, hey, Johnny, so great to hear from you.

It's so kind of you to be thinking of me. God bless you, son. Jesus loves you, Johnny. And then came the cross burning across the street from his house. There were men in sheets and hoods who were facing their home outside and his sons and daughters were looking out of their bedroom windows in fear.

But out of the front door strolled the Reverend Wade Watts with a smile on his face. Boys, what are you all dressed up for tonight? Halloween isn't for another four months. If I'd have known you were

gonna build a fire like that, I'd have brought some hot dogs and marshmallows.

And as always, he said, God bless you, Johnny. Jesus loves you, Johnny. One day, Reverend Watts was eating at a diner and Johnny and several other Klansmen walked into the restaurant to intimidate him.

And as they came in, it was so quiet that you could hear every eye and every head turn and face Johnny and the men as they surrounded Reverend Watts' table.

[26 : 17] And Johnny said to Reverend Watts, your kind ain't welcome here. And if you knew what was best for you, you'd leave this place and you'd get out of here. It was a threat.

And as Johnny looked down at Reverend Watts' plate, he had just received the chicken that he ordered and Johnny threatened him and said, whatever you do to that chicken, we're gonna do to you.

And Reverend Watts picked up the chicken with his hand and he held it up and he kissed it. And even the other Klansmen around him couldn't help but laugh.

During another one of Johnny's phone calls, Reverend Watts started praying for Johnny on the phone right then and there. And he prayed that God would forgive his sin and that he would see the love of Jesus, that he would experience conversion, that he would turn from the path of hate to experience the love of God for sinners like us.

After that, there was another fire at the church, more harassment, more threats, more phone calls. And then there was nothing. There was silence for 10 years.

[27 : 25] A decade passed before Reverend Wade Watts got another phone call from Johnny Lee Clary and on the other end a voice said, Reverend Wade, do you remember me? Well, hello Johnny, what brings you to call an old friend like me?

And Johnny explained that his life was a wreck, that his girlfriend had rejected him, that the FBI was investigating him, but that he had started attending church recently. And he explained that God had convicted him of his sin and that he had just become a Christian and he was calling to ask Reverend Wade to please forgive him for all the things that he had done to him and to his church and to his family.

And as Reverend Watts listened to his confession, he told Johnny that he had forgiven him many years ago, but that this confession now opened up the space for something way more than forgiveness.

He said, Johnny, you have a story to tell and you're gonna tell it at my church this Sunday morning. And Johnny hesitated and he said, I don't know if I can go. These people are gonna hate me. He said, these people might be tempted to hate you, but they're not going to because they love Jesus and they're gonna treat you with that same love.

A few people didn't come to church that Sunday because they were afraid that a former leader of the KKK was there and that was understandable, of course. But most of them came and as Johnny got up, he began to share what God had done in his life.

[28 : 44] And as he began to confess all that he had done to Reverend Wade and to his church and to his family, he began to weep uncontrollably. And as Johnny was stumbling over his words and had tears streaming down his face, Reverend Watts walked up to the stage and put his arm around him.

And Johnny put his arm around Reverend Watts, a black pastor, a leader of the NAACP, and a former leader of the KKK embracing one another in worship because the power of the gospel. And I think we might have a picture up here of the two of them many years later. They began a friendship that lasted many years. But that morning, Johnny continued to share about how God could forgive even really evil people like him.

He'd asked Jesus' blood to wash away his sins. He'd asked God to give him a new heart. And at the end of the service, Reverend Watts' own teenage daughter, Tia, came forward and confessed Jesus as her savior and said that she wanted to be baptized.

Because she said her whole life she couldn't believe in Jesus. She couldn't believe in God. She couldn't follow him. Because her whole life she watched what her father went through and she watched him be harassed and humiliated and abused.

[29 : 58] She had seen a burning cross outside her bedroom as a little girl. She had seen so much injustice. She had seen so much evil and abuse. And if God was real, where was he in that? How could God care about us in the face of so much evil and abuse?

And then she listened as the man who committed all of that evil confessed every last bit of it and asked for forgiveness. And Tia saw that the power of the gospel was real, that Jesus was real, that grace was real, that mercy was real, that Jesus restores, that Jesus heals and that he's building a new family from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Tia saw that Jesus reveals the God who is gracious and merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Years later, Johnny Lee Clary would later be ordained as a pastor, as the only white pastor in Reverend Watts' black denomination, the Church of God in Christ.

All because somebody had loved his enemies in the midst of great evil because he followed Jesus, the one who had mercy on us even when we were his enemies and who brought us into his family and who made us sons and daughters.

Let's pray. Our God and Father, thank you that even though we are those people who are undeserving of your mercy, that you have shown us mercy in the gospel.

[31 : 33] Would you transform our hearts to love our neighbors and even our enemies this way?
Amen.