

An angry prophet

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[0:00] On to Nineveh, at last. If you go to the British Museum, you can see lots of marbles that were taken from Nineveh.

! That's one of them. It shows some... yeah, it's not too bad on the screen. They're playing what I think is probably a lyre there, Ninevite musicians.

This was about 50, 60 years after the time of Jonah, but I don't suppose it changed all that much. It was a great city.

It's not entirely clear whether 120,000 is the population or whether it means the population were children who didn't know the right hand from the left. People argue about that, but it was certainly a great city.

Probably the largest city in the world at the time. Now, as I pointed out last week, the structure of Jonah is this sandwich that we call a... I can say technically it's called a chiasm.

[1:01] God speaks judgment on Nineveh. Jonah's very unhappy about it. In the course of that, God uses Jonah to save some Gentiles. And then we looked at last week, Jonah's prayer, which is at the center, and in some ways is Jonah's spiritual high point.

It's a bit downhill from him after this, but he has got more to learn. And then, as we've just read, God uses Jonah to save some more Gentiles, but Jonah's still unhappy about it.

But then at the end, God speaks not judgment, but grace to Nineveh. So we're going to look at these last two chapters, these last...

The bottom bread of the sandwich, if you like. The way out back to where it began, in a sense, but not to where it began, because it began with judgment and ends with grace.

So we'll look at it in the two natural sections. We'll look at Nineveh's repentance, and we'll look at Jonah's object lesson. But while we're thinking about that, you might like to keep in mind that slogan of the minimalists, that less is more.

[2:17] Because I think this is what we get here. It's definitely less is more. I pointed out before that Jonah has a great sense of drama, and that Jonah almost reads like a screenplay for a film or something like that.

And I think that's still true in these last chapters, but it's a different sort of screenplay. This is not a Cecil B. DeMille.

It's not a George Lucas blockbuster. What we get here, we're definitely in Woody Allen territory for these last few chapters.

It's very minimalist. Less is more. So keep that in mind as we go to look at this passage. So, we've had the warm-up in chapter one, episode one, and with a reflection in episode two.

And so we kind of expect this is going to be the really exciting bit, don't we? And it starts promisingly enough, doesn't it, with an overview of the city.

[3:27] And then we get this voiceover from the local tourist board. Welcome to our important city. Your visit will take three days. We could add a bit more, perhaps.

Take a pleasant walk along the Tigris, and don't miss the fabulous Temple of Ishtar. Yeah, this is going to be great. This is going to be really exciting. So, cut to our prophet, our hero, coming into the city.

Standard prophet garb, I guess. Probably a dusty robe and a stick. Towsled hair, perhaps. Zoom into a close-up. Suitably thunderous expression.

Yeah, this is going to be good. What's he got to say? Well, what has he got to say? Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overturned. This Hebrew word for overturned is the one used in Genesis 19.25 about Sodom and Gomorrah.

And it may be a direct reference to that. Possibly, we can't be certain, but it possibly sort of implies some geophysical disaster rather than destruction by an enemy.

[4:40] So, yeah, this is going to be something really spectacular, isn't it? You can almost imagine the special effects guys firing up their computers.

Yeah, fire from heaven. We're going to get an Oscar for this one. No, sorry guys. The Ninevites are going to repent. Oh, well, never mind. I can do you a great crowd scene.

We could have panic in the streets. We could have some real exciting pagan stuff in the temper of Ishtar, perhaps. But the strange thing is, we don't get any of that.

In fact, the description that Jonah gives us is so understated, almost to the point of anticlimax, isn't it? It's really quite strange. I've called it a laconic repentance.

I'm sorry if you don't know. Laconic's maybe a long word, but I couldn't think of a better one. It means something expressed in very few words. It's the opposite of garrulous. Some people want to, I'd say lots of words to talk about things, but if you're laconic, it means you say things in very few words.

[5:44] And this is what we get here. In fact, what happens? 40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned. The Ninevites believed God. Eh?

Just like that. Would you like to expand on that a bit, Jonah? I mean, did you show them some sign? Were there great debates in the marketplace? No, we don't get any of that, do we?

All we get is the Ninevites believed God. And that's all Jonah wants to tell us. So he says, well, I will tell you what happened next. They all declared a fast.

What? Just like that. And then what? Well, then somebody went to tell the king. Your majesty, this Hebrew prophet's turned up.

And he says his God, Yahweh, is very angry with Nineveh. And he's going to destroy it in 40 days. And we do get a bit more reaction from the king.

[6:44] But even that is not that much, really, is it? I mean, I'll read it out. It is, again, very short of words.

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Basically, what he says, well, that's not good. We'll take off our fancy clothes. We'll have a fast and we'll clean up our act.

And then maybe it won't happen. Maybe God will not destroy the city after all. And even from the king, we really don't get very much. And what's more, it didn't happen. God did not destroy the city, as it tells us at the end.

And that's all we get. It's really quite extraordinary, actually. I mean, if compared to that graphic description of the storm in chapter 1, this is absolutely sparse.

[7:55] Why do we get this laconic description? I think there might be two reasons. Perhaps it's just because Jonah's so angry about it that's all he can manage to tell us.

I don't know. But perhaps God wants Jonah to focus on something else. We are going to get a dramatic conclusion, but it's quite different from the one we might have expected.

But before we look on that, let's reflect a little on this description that we do get of Nineveh's repentance. What is it that God requires? We remember the words of Jesus.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. The yoke, of course, is a thing that you put around the neck of an oxen when it was putting a plow. And so, in a sense, it's a sign of labor and control.

[9:06] But Jesus says, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. And in one sense, in fact, God did not require much of Nineveh, and he does not require much of us.

There is no need for all those extravagant rituals of pagan worship. If you remember, the sailors in chapter 1 just needed one simple act of obedience and made vows to the Lord.

The Ninevites weren't required to go to Jerusalem and submit to the temple worship. You remember, this was a problem for the Pharisees in Jesus' time, and it seems to have been a problem for Jonah here as well.

God seemed to be setting the bar far too low for the Ninevites. Surely some extravagant penance would be required for all their wickedness. You know, maybe years and years of practice and study and severe self-discipline, perhaps they might slowly urge their way towards acceptance to God. But this isn't what God requires at all. In 2 Kings chapter 5, we learn of another Gentile. Naaman was the commander of the Aramaean army, and he went to the prophet Elisha, seeking a cure for his leprosy.

[10:24] And if you know the story, it's 2 Kings 5. I won't read it all out. I'll just summarize it. But what happened basically is that Elisha didn't even bother to answer the door. He just sent a messenger and said, Naaman, you go and bathe seven times in the Jordan.

And Naaman was absolutely furious. He said, you know, I could do some great thing, or I've got much cleaner rivers, much better rivers than the Jordan, where I come from. But no, the prophet had said, go and bathe in the Jordan.

And he nearly went home, still not cured, but his servants went to him and said, well, hang on a minute. My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? How much more then when he tells you, wash and be cleaned? All Naaman had to do was have a change of heart and submit to the words of God through his prophet.

Naaman, in fact, had to swallow his pride, and that was all he had to do, in a sense, to receive God's blessing, was to swallow his pride. And in fact, that passage and this passage here tells us that what God really requires is both a very simple thing, but at the same time, the most difficult thing in the world.

[11:48] God requires a change of heart. There's no room for pride, whether it's pride with or without a capital P, in responding to God's call.

What we do read of the Ninevite repentance is all about humility. It says, when the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down in the dust.

And that repentance brings an instant response from God, just as it did for that thief who was crucified with Jesus. Humility saved Nineveh for a while.

Obedience to the word of God. As it happens, it wasn't to last. And we will find, when we move on to Nahum, that it was in the end, pride that destroyed the city of Nineveh in the end.

But that's in Nahum. Jonah leaves us with Nineveh's repentance, and the fact that the city was not destroyed.

[13:03] So now let's think about the last chapter, Jonah's object lesson. So we cut again to our hero. Now he's leaving the city.

It's presumably 40 days later. So we get a long view of the city, and it looks pretty much like it did before we entered it.

But Jonah is really cross. He was looking forward to all that fire and brimstone. And he thought the Ninevites really deserved it.

And in a sense, they did. They had been very wicked. And Jonah is so upset that actually, in chapter 4, verse 3, he's suicidal. He says he asked for death.

He wasn't quite prepared to kill himself, but he asked for the Lord to take his life away, just as I think Elisha did. Isn't he right about that? I think so. But Jonah doesn't really know what he's asking for, in spite of his fishy experience.

[14:08] He still doesn't really understand what a terrible thing God's judgment is. He thinks it should have been visited on the Ninevites, and he was upset when it wasn't.

So God gives him a little object lesson. And we follow Jonah a mile or two further east, and Jonah settles down to watch the sun set over the city.

Verse 5. That's finally it then. Forty days gone and not a hint of burning sulfur, like at Sodom. No plague of frogs or horrible diseases, like there were in Egypt.

No devastating enemy attack, destroying the city, like when the Jews attacked Jericho. Nothing. God's judgment doesn't seem to be what it's cracked up to be.

It seems that God's wrath is not what it was. And what do we get instead? We get a plant. God. This plant springs up and shelters Jonah from the sun.

[15:30] There's a small token of God's grace sheltering him from the blistering sun, but Jonah seems to think it's only what he deserves. In spite of his experience in the fish, Jonah's attitude is still rather self-centered.

He is, as we say, in denial, refusing to face up to his own selfish attitude. Jonah's happy about the plant, but you notice he doesn't thank God for it.

He just says he's very happy about it. And so the next day, you find in verse 7, Jonah gets his object lesson. And I'd suggest to you that if you want to make sense of this object lesson, you need to think of it as judgment written small.

I think that's the way to think of it. It's wrath toned down so that Jonah is not totally destroyed. So we don't get a plague of frogs.

Instead, we get a plague of one worm. But it does kill the thing that Jonah was trusting in. We don't get fire from heaven, but we do get a scorching wind.

[16:46] Jonah can hardly stand up even to that much wrath, we find in verse 8. He's faint. He gets faint with sunstroke. He gets sunburn and heat stroke. And even the mild inconvenience of a dead plant is enough to reignite Jonah's anger and his suicidal tendencies.

But the Lord does have a final message for Jonah. God said to Jonah, do you have a right to be angry about the vine? I do, he said.

I am angry enough to die. I think we have to be careful here because a more literal translation is not so much do you have a right to be angry, but do you do well to be angry?

But I think actually probably the NIV here does catch the sense what God is really asking. You know, was that, do you have a right to be angry because you had a right to that plant?

He's still thinking that the vine was only his due, only what he deserved. God says, no, Jonah, you don't have a right to grace.

[17:59] If you had a right to it, it wouldn't be grace, would it? Your status as a prophet, okay, you may be a prophet of the Lord, but your status doesn't make you more deserving than those Ninevites or for that matter, those sailors on that ship that you nearly caused to be drowned and who planted and cultivated the vine anyway?

God asks that question, doesn't he, in verse 10. You didn't plant it. I made it grow, says God. It's all grace. And it's only a plant anyway.

He is here today and gone tomorrow. You remember Jesus made much the same point. He said, look at the birds of the air. They don't sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you, by worrying, can add a single hour to his life? Why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow.

They do not labor or spin, yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

[19:27] What's Jesus saying here? What's God saying? He's not saying that plants and wildlife are unimportant. In fact, precisely the opposite point is being made. Jonah was concerned about and had pity on the vine.

God does care about birds and grass, and if the untimely destruction of Jonah's single vine is a tragedy, how much more so will be the destruction of 100,000 citizens with all their animals?

Verse 11. Jonah's ideas are far too small and too self-centered. He was prepared to be thrown overboard for the sake of those sailors, but he seems to have forgotten even that lesson.

He was ready to call down fire from heaven on the Ninevites, and yet he complains to himself about a touch of sunburn. So we pan back at the end to a final view of the city.

Yes, the city had been idolatrous, and regretfully it would soon be idolatrous again. It had been cruel, and regretfully it would soon become more so, as we will learn from Nahum.

[20:47] Ninevites' repentance didn't last all that long, but at the time they did have a change of heart, and that generation at least, those people did turn from their wickedness.

And it was a great city with thousands of inhabitants, men, women, and children, all made in God's image, and with their trades and their farms, all their human creativity and industry, and it was a very creative city.

That's one reason why I showed you those musicians at the beginning. But the Ninevites were ignorant about the world, as it really is. It says they didn't know their right hand from their left. So people argue about what that means. Does it mean that there were 120,000 children who didn't know their right hand from their left? It may mean that. I personally think it doesn't mean that. I think what it means is that all the people of Nineveh didn't know their right hand from their left. They didn't really know how the world really worked.

[21:55] They didn't understand God's sovereignty over the whole of the world. See, Jonah had all the history of God's dealings with Israel, didn't he? He'd know about the destruction of Sodom.

He'd read about it. Unlike Abraham, Abraham disliked Sodom and yet he did pray for it. But Jonah wouldn't even pray for Nineveh.

Jonah was not at all ignorant. He knew about grace. He knew how God worked. He knew he had all the scriptures of the writings of Moses and so on.

He'd studied the history of God's calling the people. He wasn't ignorant and yet he was furious over a dead plant.

But God has a different way of looking at things. He has compassion for Nineveh. So what is our attitude to Brighton? Would we be along with Jonah wanting to call down fire from heaven?

[23:06] Remember the disciples said that one time didn't they? To Jesus shall we call down fire from heaven? Jesus said no, that's not the business I'm in at all. Yes, there will be judgment at the end but this is the time of grace of calling sinners to repentance.

Do we understand the urgency of the message of grace? Judgment can't be delayed forever. We're told that also. Jesus didn't call down judgment on Jerusalem but it was delayed only for what, 40 years. It was only 100 years from Jonah to Nahum perhaps 150 years from Jonah to the time when Nineveh was destroyed.

There was an urgency in the message. God told Jonah to go now to Nineveh and do we have in mind that urgency of the message of grace?

do we seek ways to make people listen. We don't know what Jonah did to make the Ninevites listen.

[24:24] One must assume there was rather more to it than just standing up once and saying get 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed. But we have that same message, the message that there is judgment but we shouldn't forget to add to it what Jonah did that there is now is the time of grace.

Now is the time to seek the Lord. And so we shouldn't be calling down fire on Brighton I think. On fallen fallen is Babylon the great it says in Revelation and yet not yet in a sense we are still in Babylon and we should pray for the peace of the city as the Jews did while they were there in exile. But we should above all be praying that the word of God might be proclaimed faithfully and might be proclaimed not just as a message of judgment but as a message that it is time to turn repent and turn to the living God.

So to finish I've chosen a final hymn 597 which is actually a hymn about preachers really it's a hymn I think designed probably to be sung at the induction of ministers the ordination of clergy whatever phrase you want to use and it does remind us that any of us who stand up in any way and preach the word of God but really that applies to all of us so I think this hymn doesn't only apply to those who are professionals if you want to put it words like that preachers that we all are heralds of the dawning day and it reminds us what an important task this is and we have that really quite scary phrase in the last verse of this hymn sorry the first verse the last two lines of the first stanza of this hymn it describes the preachers of grace as agents of your righteousness trained for unremitting war it's quite a scary thought really isn't it but it's right

I think the we are always at war with the powers of darkness and so let's sing this I say you can sing it as a prayer for those who are preachers of the word we have Steve visiting us as well of course tonight who is also like a professional if you want to use that term for it a preacher but all of us are in a sense preachers of the world and we're all involved in spiritual warfare so let's sing 597 together