

Jonah 1:1-3

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[0 : 00] Would you please stand with me for the reading of God's Word? Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning.

My special welcome to you. We're glad that you're here on this Sunday where we break from our spring series, given that we live in an academic context, and begin our summer series, thus the reading from the book of Jonah.

We've titled our summer series, Nineveh, Two Tales of a City. The title is, of course, a play on words, borrowing from Charles Dickens' popular book, A Tale of Two Cities.

[1 : 25] If you're not familiar with it, bits from the opening line go like this. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

It was the spring of hope. It was the winter of despair. And so also for the ancient city of Nineveh, at least according to the biblical record.

Nineveh was a strategic Assyrian urban center. It's the focal point of not one, but two prophetic biblical books.

Her citizens and her ways are the subject of the book of Jonah. As you see, she's already been mentioned there in verse 2.

As well as the book of Nahum. And we're going to see this summer, in the case of Jonah, for Nineveh, although they didn't know it yet, it was the best of times.

[2 : 32] There was a spring of hope in the air. While the latter content of Nahum also takes Nineveh as its historical setting, but in some sense, at least before we've read through it, we come to the book thinking that it was the worst of times, when the winter of despair was just around the corner.

Living as we do in a world-class city, we've just come to think that these two books might be helpful for us. All too often when, what would I call you, when Christian urbanists set up a construct, a theological construct about the city, that they love going to the book of Jonah.

Yet, non-urban Christians, when they view the city, they tend to look to the book of Nahum.

What is God's take on the city? Well, actually, it's the book of Jonah and Nahum. Our plan is to avoid both ends of the spectrum.

And so, presenting two books this summer, Jonah and Nahum, our hope is that your view of God will be enlarged. Practically, of course, that His plan for great cities would be unfolded.

- [4 : 01] And that these dissonant voices would move together in ways that would challenge us to listen more intently on His call upon our life.
- Just a note about the summer. We're going to do something we haven't tried before. It's called, I guess I would call it an expositional experiment. So hold on to your seat.
- Well, in these seats, you normally have to hold on to them anyway. When you come back next week, I won't continue in Jonah. Pastor Jackson will do the introduction to Nahum.
- And then when you come back, I'll come back to the next little bit in Jonah, and we will hear in kind of symphonic, dissonant sounds, Jonah and Nahum.
- We will travel through both books all the way through the summer, back and forth. So we haven't tried it before. We're not quite sure how it will play out. But we'll give it a run.
- [5 : 04] The setting for the book of Jonah is put down in chapter 1, verses 1 to 3. As I looked at it this week, and I hope you have your eyes on it now, two things stand out.
- The word of the Lord came, verses 1 and 2, but the prophet of the Lord went, verse 3.
- By way of structure, those seem to be the two halves of everything I should have to say today. The word of the Lord came, but the prophet of the Lord went.
- Notice how everything in the first two verses centers around the word of the Lord. Now, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.
- There's interesting things there. The word of the Lord evidently comes with a calling, and secondly, it enters a certain context. Let me say a couple of words about each.
- [6 : 21] Notice the calling. Arise, and go, and call out. I mean, those are three words that would be wonderful for an ordination sermon.
- Arise, go, and call out. I love the word call, or cry, to cry out, to call out. Jerome, in his Latin translation, the Vulgate, translates that Hebrew word, preach.
- Arise, go, and preach. In the Hebrew, the word there for calling out, or crying out, has a semantic range.
- What does it mean to cry out? It means to announce, to proclaim, but it also means to plead.
- There are times when it actually is translated to make an offer. I think of Deuteronomy 10, verse 15, where Israel is told that when they come to fight against a city, they are to offer it, or call out to it, literally, terms of peace.
- [7 : 48] And then he goes on to clarify, in the book of Deuteronomy, the writer, that I'm not referring to the cities that are within the boundaries of Israel, but when you come against nations that are far away, it actually says, very far away, well, the proclamation of God's people was to call out, to offer it terms of peace, before one would fight against it.
- There's a certain ambiguity, as we open the book, that might have us withhold judgment on what it means when the word came to Jonah and said, call out against Nineveh.
- Who is Jonah? Jonah, nothing's really told about him here other than whose son he is. But I want you to take a look.
- It's worth at least the first sermon and the message. We probably won't head there during the summer. So just turn back to 2 Kings, some of the storytelling parts of the Hebrew Scriptures.
- 2 Kings 14, 23-27. There we find the very same Jonah, son of Amittai, mentioned.
- [9 : 11] And I want you to see these verses, 23-27, three things. It will let you know at least when he lived. It will let you know where he was from. And it will show you the ways in which God used him.

Now in the 15th year of Amaziah, the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria and he reigned 41 years.

In other words, this Jonah of Amittai, which you're going to see by the time you read on down into the text, is one that lived after the divide under Solomon.

It says as you go on, and he did, that is the king, what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin.

He restored the border of Israel from Lamethath as far as the sea of Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-Hefer.

[10 : 25] Interesting. When did he live? Sometime after Solomon's split, probably 790s to 750s B.C.

is the material of our book. Where did he live? From Gath-Hefer. It's kind of mid-range in Israel. Again, I looked at Jerome a little bit this week.

Jerome calls Gath-Hefer an inconsiderable village. Kind of a man from nowhere. And how did God use him?

Well, look at what you learn from 2 Kings. When he spoke, the prophet, verse 26, what did God do? For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.

But the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, the son of Joash. This you know about the prophet Jonah. He lived in a day when God's people and God's king were doing evil, when their ways were abandoning the word of God.

[11 : 38] And yet, through his proclamation, God did a work of salvation. God brought good things to Israel who'd gone bad through the word of Jonah who was called to speak to them.

The word of the Lord. The word of the Lord came. We know a bit now about what calling meant, and we know to whom it came. I want to look for a moment.

The word of the Lord enters a certain context. Look again back to the book of Jonah. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it for their evil has come up before me.

Nineveh is called a great city. Godol. It's great not merely in its size, but its influence. When you think today about great cities, there are three things that those who do urban study keep coming up with, things that define a great city.

Great cities today are vast educational hubs. Think of our own neighborhood. Cities are places of cultural and ethnic vitality. And great cities by nature have to be an economic engine for an entire region.

[13 : 05] Nineveh had all of those things. It was a center of educational fervor. If you're a book person, you would have loved to have lived in Nineveh and been able to visit the library of Ashurbanerpal.

This was a library where we have uncovered no fewer than, from what I've been told, 25,000 inscribed tablets in the library. I don't know if it came with an electronic arm that would deliver it, but there they were, including the Gilgamesh epic.

Nineveh was also a place of cultural and ethnic vitality. The arts were living large in Nineveh.

The British Museum actually holds a relic of a lion hunt, which is considered to be the finest of Assyrian art. It dates back to this time.

Nineveh was an economic engine for the entire region at that point for the entire world. Sennacherib, one of its leaders, rebuilt gates. We have evidence of the canals that had gone in, of administration buildings, of parks that were put down.

[14 : 21] At the time of Jonah, Assyria, and Nineveh in particular, well, you're looking at the place that ruled the world. It's not quite Chicago, or Chicago's not quite that, but Chicago likes to classify itself as a great city with our educational bookends of the university here and northwestern to the north, with all of our architecture and arts, with all of our ethnic diversity, with all of our purported economic engine for the region.

There's a characteristic here, though, of cities, great cities, that we share with Nineveh, not merely the three I've mentioned, but that the city was filled with evil.

Do you see it there? call out against it, for their evil has come up before me. This word also has a semantic range that requires comment.

The word evil can, of course, include their conduct. Their conduct was evil, but it's also used to speak of the condition of Nineveh. In other words, not merely what they did, but all that had gone down.

All that they were acting out and all that they were living under. Think of it in this way, its conduct as well as its condition.

[16 : 01] The things it committed, but the cruelty that had come upon it. Let me show it to you. It's nine times in the book. Evil. Nine times in the book. And I want you to see the range.

You'll see it there in verses 7 and 8. The sailors, next week or two weeks from now, will speak of it in regard to the condition they're under. Not their own conduct, but why has this evil come upon us twice over?

Why has this bad thing happened to us? When you get over to chapter 3 and verse 8 and 9, you'll see evil used again.

Let anyone, says the king, turn from his evil. Or verse 10, when he saw that they had turned from their evil, that's of course their conduct, God relented of the disaster in English, but in Hebrew, evil.

They were doing evil and God relented of placing them under a condition in which they would have to bear up to all of that. You'll see the term again in chapter 4, verse 2, when Jonah will say that he knew God would relent from disaster.

[17 : 14] He would relent from things that would make you live under an evil condition. And finally, you'll see it translated with wonderful elasticity in chapter 4, verse 6, where the vine appeared to save Jonah from his discomfort.

Now, this is important for us to know at the outset of the book, this idea of evil. Because when we think of Jonah, we normally think that he was going to preach against it for all the things they had done.

But the term itself, even in the book, is more full-orbed. He's to preach of the conduct of the city and in some sense he laments the condition of the city.

Just like we ought to do today. Chicago. What do you mean when you say sometimes it's an evil place?

Well, at times you mean the conduct of its citizens can be incredibly cruel. and evil. But at times you mean the condition in which the people are living.

[18 : 30] It's just bearing up under the weight of it. In other words, for Jonah, that call should evoke more than condemnation, but compassion.

the hints are there. already, we've seen them, that indicate that his calling might include terms for peace.

The idea of evil here is ambiguous enough to include the idea that God is concerned not only for the things committed, but for that which characterizes the people's condition.

And so the word of the Lord came. Verse 3, But the prophet of the Lord went.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord.

[19 : 44] Where did he go? To Tarshish. He was told in one sense to go north and east some 600 miles and he went south and west about as far away as he could get.

In Isaiah Tarshish is said to be very far away beyond the coastlands. So he paid the fare or perhaps even hired the whole boat and said let's go.

That's astounding. God has made a decree and Jonah has defied it. God said go.

Jonah said no. God says take that road. Jonah says I want that boat. God reveals a word and Jonah in wonderment rebels.

We have a complete anomaly on our hands here. You have a prophet on the run. There is no other parallel to this in all the scriptures. Well that's where he went.

[21 : 06] Why did he go? Why did he go? why did he decide to live apart from God's word? I'm not going to run you to chapter 4 verse 2.

We'll wait until we arrive there. Our text actually tells us why. The emphasis is repeated. He wanted to get away from the presence of the Lord.

Do you see it there? Twice told. But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. And again repeated by the narrator as if he doesn't want you to miss it.

The emphasis of the text, the end of verse 3, away from the presence of the Lord. The same phrasing that you find verse 1 ending with when their evil had come up before me or before my presence.

Literally, woodenly, before the faces of the Lord. Before his face. Why did he go? He did not want to live before the face of the Lord.

[22 : 08] this is the case for many in the church today, even those who go by the name of Christ.

In our core, for some and some here, there is an internal dissatisfaction with God and a decision to live beyond his gaze.

I will not see him face to face. And so, you, we, at different times in life, some even today, this morning, we were able to reach beyond the veil of the externals and into the heart and take a look, this would actually be in play.

To create a world where God can't be heard or where I won't have to be seen. To chase another horizon.

What was that song we sang today? The Matt Redmond language? What a contrast.

[23 : 44] How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty, my soul longs and even faints for you, for here my heart is satisfied within your presence. And Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord.

Let me tell you what's going on here then as we close out today. First of all, I want you to know it's absolutely foolish what Jonah does.

Foolish in the sense of absurd, as of juvenile, as like adolescent.

Stephen Crane, I saw a man pursuing the horizon round and round they sped. I was disturbed at this. I accosted the man.

It is futile, I said. You can never. You lie, he cried and ran on. That's where we meet Jonah. It ought to evoke within us a couple of questions and a sentiment.

[24 : 59] Let me ask you. who's worse off? Nineveh or Jonah? Who's committed a greater evil?

The churchman or the citizen? In some sense, our heart ought to break twice this morning. Once for Nineveh, Jonah.

For the word is not coming twice for Jonah. For not only does he live under their misdeeds and misery, what the introduction is meant to show you is that the heart of Jonah is a mess.

With the twist of verse 3, you begin to see your first sense that this book is going to be about two characters, God and Jonah.

It's a prophetic book unlike any other. Usually you read the prophetic books for thus saith the Lord and the prophetic voice is going out to others.

[26 : 08] This book completely different. Story form, story boards, God and Jonah. And the conflict has been set by the close of verse 3 because we now know that Jonah is in a most dangerous position.

For the sins of those who hear the word and reject it, I'm telling you, are more dangerous than the sins of those who have never heard and had opportunity to repent.

you are left with the question after reading three verses, what will God do with Jonah?

For ironically, he's got this incredible ability to suddenly make it all about him. As do we.

I hope you come back because through the summer we're going to see the heart of God for a man in rebellion and the heart of God for a city in misery.

[27 : 39] We say it's really two tales of a city. By verse three, the two faces of Jonah.

He's a negative exemplar of what one does when they hear preaching or a call to preach, but he's also one with which whom, with which we sympathize.

I don't know if you're on the run today or not. I know some of you are.

May God meet us and our city in accordance with our need. heavenly father, so we give ourselves to this book this summer.

Speak to us. Use it mightily. Your word to call, to send, to convert, to change.

[28 : 57] For all of our deepest problems are those found within the deep recesses of our own heart.

May you meet us even there in Christ's name. Amen.