

A great turning

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[0 : 0 0] Back in January 1907, I've read of a revival breaking out at a Bible conference in Pyongyang, in what is now the capital of North Korea.

Those attending the conference came under this deep conviction of sin, when the preacher called them to repent of their traditional hatred of another country.

And in light of the good news of Jesus, those at the conference realized that they stood before God, equally sinful with everyone else in the world, and yet they had been rescued by God's grace to them in Jesus.

And so what that did was it took away their pride, it took away their bitterness, and they returned home with a willingness to repent of this wrong attitude that they had towards others.

Worship services were filled with a new power, and there was this explosive growth in the church. And if you're a student of church history, you'll know that there are moments in church history when there are revivals like that throughout the world and throughout history, where there's this massive turning point where people turn to God in a big way, in big numbers.

[1 : 2 0] And there's an example of that in the book of Jonah, in chapter 3, verse 5. We read, And you have to wonder, if you've been with us through the first two chapters of Jonah, what is it that brought about this change in the Ninevites?

And even the king, in verse 8, recognized that they were a violent people. So in verse 8, the king says, Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. What is it that brought about this massive turning point, or turning to God in this city of Nineveh?

And as we reflect on that, of course, we don't just want to leave it in Nineveh. We want to think to ourselves, what is it that can turn us back to God, either for the first time, or if we've known God for a long time, and we are conscious in our own minds, in our own hearts, that we're just distancing ourselves from him, that we're tending to go a little while longer without spending time in prayer, or interested in his word, or maybe drifting a little from being with his people.

What is it that's going to draw us back to him, as we so long for it, as we so want? We're going to think about that this morning, as we dwell on chapter 3 of Jonah.

And what we see, first of all, is that what draws the people of Nineveh to turn to God, is that God warns them. He warns them of what's coming.

[3 : 0 5] So he warns them in words. In verse 1, the word of the Lord came to Jonah. In verse 2, proclaim to it the message I give you.

So there's a verbal message that Jonah has to give to them. In verse 3, Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord.

So God warns them in words. And you see in verse 4, Jonah proclaims, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. So it's crystal clear.

These words of God, this warning of God. So they don't have to read the tea leaves in the bottom of their teacup. They don't have to look at the stars for some kind of sign from God.

It is crystal clear as God speaks to them in words through Jonah, this warning. And it is to Nineveh that he speaks this warning.

[4 : 04] So Nineveh is a great city, as we see in verse 3. It was a very large city. It took three days to go through it. It's a tricky enough kind of phrase to translate.

So some people think it means it took three days to walk around it. Some people would say it took three days to go across it. Some people would say if you really wanted to experience everything that Nineveh had to offer, you'd need about three days.

I don't know what the equivalent would be in Cork. Maybe three years to experience all of the wonders of Cork. Nineveh, three days, big city. We read at the end of chapter 4 that there was 120,000 people there.

A great city in terms of its size and yet capable of great sin, capable of great wrongdoing. Even the king himself acknowledges that in verse 8 as he mentions their evil ways and their violence.

And some of the things that the Ninevites did were horrific. They would keep you awake at night with nightmares, some of the horrific things that they did to other people.

[5 : 10] And so God warns in words this great city of Nineveh. And what he warns them of is that there is judgment coming. There is justice coming.

In verse 4, 40 days in Nineveh will be overthrown. So God is warning them that as you have killed people and destroyed people and put people to death, there's going to be consequences for that, that you will be overthrown in 40 days.

There is going to be, this is my judgment on the situation. This is the justice that is going to be done. And we realize, of course, that we always are eager for the courts to get it right, for judges to get it right, for juries to get it right.

So it's not a nice experience when a judge or a jury or a court gets a judgment wrong, and either the innocent goes free, or sorry, the innocent is put into prison, or the guilty goes free.

And that's not a nice thing. But we know that when justice is done, and when the right judgment is passed, that is a good thing. If you had lost a loved one to the brutality of Nineveh, you would have wanted God to act justly.

[6 : 31] You would have wanted judgment to come. Years ago, I visited Auschwitz. And as you can imagine, Auschwitz is an unnerving place to visit.

Part of what's unnerving about it is that the sky is blue, and the grass is green, and the birds are singing, and the buildings are red brick.

And then what you see there is the mountains of shoes left from the victims, and you see the mountains of glasses that are left from the victims, and you see the mountains of hair that has been cut off the victims of the gas chambers.

And then you realize, as we were reminded during the week on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, you realize that justice hasn't really been done.

So 1963 to 1965, 22 Auschwitz officers were tried for crimes of mass murder. 22 tried. Six were given life sentences.

[7 : 38] And the rest were given short sentences. And you realize that's not good. That's not just. That's not a good judgment. But in the case of Nineveh, the judgment that God pronounces and the justice that he is going to bring is a good thing.

And so God warns them of what's to come. And as we hear that, we need to realize that this word of warning of judgment that is coming is a kindness on the part of God.

It is an expression of compassion on the part of God that he would warn them in this way. If there was going to be no consequences for what they had done, if they would just in peace go to their graves and never face consequences, to hear a warning like this would not be kind.

It would be like the boy crying wolf when there was no wolf. That's just a joke. But if it's true, if there is a wolf, then it is a kindness to warn of the wolf that is coming.

In the case of Nineveh, it is not a wolf that is coming. It is the Lord of all creation. It is the one who would send his son to die in a cross so that people would not have to face his justice and his judgment.

[9 : 14] Who would lay down his life for people so that they could turn to him. And so it is a kindness and a mercy of God that he would warn them of what is coming.

He didn't have to warn them. He could have waited the 40 days in silence and not said a word and then brought justice. But it is merciful.

It is kind. It is compassionate. As we'll see clearly spelled out for us in chapter 4, it is an expression of the truth. When God asks the question, 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? God is giving the people of Nineveh in spite of all that they have done an opportunity to turn from their ways, their wicked ways and live.

And it is this powerful word spoken of warning, spoken in kindness and compassion that is part of what means they turn to him.

[10 : 28] Because they believe it to be true. Verse 5, The Ninevites believed God and so this great city with this great sin now turn to him in a great way.

And as we hear that we need to think well what is the significance of that for us? Well, we need to realize first of all Jonah is unique as a prophet. We're not Jonah.

Cork isn't Nineveh. We need to hear that loud and clear. We don't go out and proclaim 40 days and Cork will be overthrown. That's not where we go with it. But we do realize that God has given a clear word of warning to people generally.

You think of what Paul says in Acts chapter 17. In the past God overlooked such ignorance but now he commands all people everywhere to repent for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man Jesus that he has appointed.

And he has given proof of this by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead some of them sneered but others said we want to hear you again on this subject.

[11 : 46] There's a clear word of warning that is appropriate for us to reflect on and to think okay it's not 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

It is the people will face Jesus who has been raised from the dead vindicated by God they will face him as the judge the perfect one who will bring justice.

And I want you to think about your response to that this morning. When Paul said that some people dismissed it and sneered at it and some said we want to hear this again we want to hear you again on this subject.

Maybe this morning if you're here thinking it can't be true that Jesus has been raised from the dead it can't be so that he will bring justice and judgment.

Are you sure? Are you willing to stake your life on that? If not please take the time to reflect on the proof that we're given that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that God will send him to return to be the judge of the living and the dead.

[13 : 06] If you're here and you've already responded to this if you've turned away from your own way you've turned to God and you want other people to hear this want other people to know this what do you say?

How do you communicate something of the concern the loving concern that you have for those in your family in your friend circles it's not easy it is heavy in some ways it's easier for Jonah to go into a city of strangers and proclaim this than it is for us to open this question in a conversation with a friend or a family member but we need to reflect on this somehow when the conversation goes into these heavier places into these deeper waters we need to be the ones who are willing to somehow find a way to lovingly in a very concerned way perhaps with tears in our eyes say to the person I'm concerned for you eternally and I love you and I want you to hear the truth that Jesus has been raised from the dead that justice will be done one day and if we don't want to know him now why would we think we would want to know him then or to love him then?

and as we do that we need to have the tone that Peter says to us in 1 Peter 3 verse 15 he says be ready to give a reason for the hope that we have but to do so with gentleness and respect people will appreciate this word of clear loving warning if it is done with gentleness and respect as we reflect on Nineveh we realize the part of what enabled them or powerfully moved them to turn to God was this warning spoken in love from God at least to them loving concern and the second factor that turns them turns their response to God is this it's that God waits God waits it's funny as we start out on chapter three it sounds familiar to us because we've had the exact same thing at the start of chapter one the word of the Lord came to

Jonah son of Amittai go to the great city of Nineveh and then you have this two chapter tangent where Jonah goes off and does his own thing you have the sea you have the storm you have the sailors you have the getting thrown into the ocean you have the big fish you've got the prayer you've got the being vomited out on dry land and all that's going on while Nineveh are still doing what Nineveh are doing and you realize God in all of that is patiently waiting and waiting on Jonah to get his act together and as he waits the people at Nineveh continue to do what they're doing and then even when this kind warning comes from the lips of Jonah what does God say 40 days he's another 40 days that he gives them to get their act together to turn to him he had every right to act there and then without delay without waiting and yet he gives them time to turn back to him and isn't it striking that even though God is patient and waits and delays and delays and delays when they hear this they don't wait they don't delay they turn back to him nearly immediately it seems verse 5 the Ninevites believed

God a fast was proclaimed in all of them from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth they have understood they don't say 40 days great we've 39 more days we can do what we want and then we'll turn back to God the kindness of God in his patience towards them has turned their hearts back to him so that the moment they hear it they respond just as this warning spoken in compassion and kindness and mercy to them turns their hearts to him so this waiting on the part of God this patience on the part of God turns their hearts to him I remember years ago a friend of mine chatting to somebody at work and the guy at work he was in his maybe 50s or 60s at the time and my friend was just asking him about his faith in

[17 : 55] Jesus and it was lovely to hear the story and this remarkable story of how God had worked in his life I think in faith to Jesus to trust Jesus and just an incredible story like his life was very different before knowing Jesus and after knowing Jesus and my friend said to this guy isn't it amazing like what a story isn't it wonderful to hear this work of God in your life and he said I wish I turned back to God sooner I wish I turned back to God earlier quicker I wish I realized the patience that God had had with me if I realized God is patiently waiting for me and his love in that I would have turned to him so much sooner God lovingly waits and waits and waits I remember chatting to another friend a few years back a lady and explaining to her about

Jesus the good news of Jesus and saying that well if we trust Jesus he deals with all of our sin he takes it all on himself on the cross we're totally and freely forgiven and her response was as she came to terms with this remarkable amazing kindness of God well if he deals with everything why don't I just keep on living the way I'm living and kind of have a deathbed turning to him and when she said that I knew she'd understood the first half of the gospel that in Jesus were totally forgiven totally dealt with all of our sin but it hadn't sunk into our heart because if we have our sin dealt with and forgiven what that causes us to do is to turn quickly back to him we don't want to delay any longer it is too good when we have tasted the goodness of

God that we would want to put off coming back to him and so even though he will wait and be patient and kind like the father in the story of the prodigal son and the son is away thinking about eating pig food and the father is just looking craning his neck seeing is he going to come back patiently waiting God patiently waits that we might see the error of our ways that we might come back to him he lovingly waits and when we realize that what it does for us it makes us turn to him it causes us it compels us it encourages us it warms our hearts to turn to him more and more quickly and if you're anything like me you forget this I forget this I think God's patience and God's waiting is a sign that he is displeased that he is distant that he is disinterested and then

I remember no he is patient he is loving he is kind and that draws me back to him and so we see God waiting he's waiting and he's waiting not because he is disinterested or overlooking what we're doing or even affirming what we're doing he's waiting so that we might turn to him when we realize his great patience let's think for a moment lastly about how God won't treat us as we deserve God won't treat us as we deserve God has given the Ninevites a word of warning spoken in love from God and from the greatest to the least they've turned to him from the king right down verse six when

Jonah's warning 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 this king likes a bit of drama doesn't he this is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles do not let people or animals herds or flocks taste anything do not let them eat or drink but let people and animals be covered with sackcloth let everyone call urgently on God let them give up their evil ways and their violence it's a bit dramatic but what it is is an expression of the king's sorrow over how they have been living this outward expression of this inward sorrow I don't know if you've had the experience where you are so anxious that you can't eat so maybe going for a job interview and you just can't think about cornflakes or porridge you just don't eat anything because of your nerves and because of your concern about the interview in the case of the king of Nineveh this anxiety which causes him to choose not to eat let us fast as an expression of our concern over how we have lived and what it has done to our relationship to God he knows they have done wrong he knows they're deserving of God's justice and he wonders whether God will be merciful verse nine who knows

[23 : 50] God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish the king recognizes that they deserve God justice and yet he's clinging on to this thread maybe he'll relent maybe he'll have compassion maybe he'll show us mercy and amazingly mercy wins the day verse 10 when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened can you imagine what it must have been like for husband and wife for friends for the king and his subjects to be sitting there eating their food that evening realizing that God wasn't going to bring on them the disaster that he had threatened can you imagine the relief the weight off their shoulders the sense of we did not deserve this after all we have done it must have been shock it must have been relief it must have been thankfulness it must have been a thousand other emotions in that moment it's incredible that mercy wins the day there's a discussion a debate about how deep rooted their turning to

God was their repentance was it a temporary thing leading to a temporary reprieve we know from Nahum I think it is that Nineveh ultimately would be destroyed but in this moment they seem to have tasted something of God's mercy and forgiveness at least in the here and now that meant the city was protected and saved from what was threatened and it has been enough to dramatically change their behavior fear but even!

even as they reflect on that it begs the question well if God spares them where's the justice in that? if you're a Ninevite wonderful but if you're somebody who has lost a loved one to Nineveh where's the justice in that?

is it that God just ignores their sin? is it that he just overlooks their sin? is he just brushes it under the carpet? it begs the question if what the Ninevites are experiencing is just a temporary sense of turning back to God how do we experience a full forgiveness when God is merciful and God is just?

how can God do this? how can we know God? how can we turn to God and be assured that he would welcome us? well the Ninevites didn't fully understand but essentially what happens is that as God turns away from the disaster that we deserve he turns to his son he turns to Jesus on the cross and what we deserve is what Jesus experiences you see if he is to deal with us in mercy he has to do it in a way that satisfies his justice and so what happens is that Jesus is the one who experiences the judgment and the justice of God on himself so that we might know his mercy and so God is seen to be fully just fully merciful and we are the ones who benefit we are the ones who are blessed we are the ones who are left in shock and relief that in spite of all we have done

[28 : 05] God would have compassion on us God would relent that we will not perish the king of Nineveh asked the question and you can imagine in his voice there was even this sense of uncertainty maybe God will relent and we will not perish and then in John's gospel we read God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish that is certainty certain language but have eternal life and so we can learn from what we see in the city of Nineveh we can learn that perhaps they only tasted a little maybe some of them turned to God and knew full forgiveness that they weren't just concerned about the well being of the city but they were concerned about the well being of their souls but for us here this morning if you've turned to

God you realize of course that what has melted your heart what has turned your heart is that in his kindness and in his mercy he has spoken a word of loving warning to you at some point that in his kindness and in his mercy and his compassion he has waited for you he has patiently waited and that in his kindness and love and mercy and compassion that he will not treat us as we deserve and it's dwelling on that character of God that will continually turn our hearts back to him and so let's pray and ask him that he would do that even now heavenly father when we lose sight of your character we turn away from you and when we get glimpses of your good character we turn back to you and so lord help us to dwell long and hard on your good merciful compassionate loving character that you would warn us of the road that we were on lord that you would wait patiently lord and that you would treat us not as we deserve oh lord we praise you for this we praise you for your love and may our hearts turn to you quickly and readily today and in the coming days amen and