

The Turn

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[0 : 0 0] Our scripture reading this morning is from the book of Jonah, chapter 3. If you're visiting with us, it's our habit usually to go through a book of the Bible. We've been looking at Jonah for, I believe this is the fourth week now. We'll finish next week.

And we're going to read all of chapter 3. And one thing I'll say before we read is just notice how basically in chapter 3 the whole story starts over.

So when you read chapter 1, verse 1, it says, The word of the Lord came to Jonah, told him to go to Nineveh and call out against it. And when you get to chapter 3, verse 1, it says, The word of the Lord came to Jonah, says go to Nineveh and call out against it.

So basically the story has started over because Jonah went astray, God has called him back. And now God has given Jonah a second chance to go and do what he called him to do the first time.

So we're going to read Jonah chapter 3. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

[1 : 1 3] So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey, and he called out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

And he issued a proclamation and published throughout Nineveh, By decree of the king and his nobles, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything.

Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

Who knows? God may turn and relent, and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish. 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.

[2 : 3 4] Amen. This is God's word. Jonathan Edwards may not be a name that you're familiar with. He's probably the most famous theologian this continent has ever produced.

And I say this continent, not the U.S., because he was alive before the U.S. became a country. He lived in the middle of the 1700s. And since I'm on a roll about history, he was also Aaron Burr's grandfather, the guy who shot Alexander Hamilton, but that's another story.

But he really was probably the most famous theologian this continent has ever known. And the story goes that when he was 19 years old, he had just graduated from Yale Divinity School, and he was about to set off on his career.

And in the months after his graduation, he sat down and he wrote down 70 resolutions, basically 70 promises to himself about the man that he wanted to be.

And you can tell by the way that his life turned out that those resolutions must have had some kind of an effect on him. But I want to read resolution number 55 to you. So here's 19-year-old Jonathan Edwards, and he says this.

[3 : 46] He says, And I wonder what you think about that.

You know, a lot of times you'll hear people say, what do you think heaven is like? And we love to talk about what heaven might be like. Sometimes it's not very pious things.

Somebody might be a baseball player, and they pass away, and they say, Well, I know if there's a heaven, he's playing baseball. But we like to dream about what we think that heaven will be like. But you don't hear people talking the same way about hell, usually.

We don't like to dwell on what hell might be like. In fact, you know, if you're a preacher, and you're called a fire and brimstone preacher, that's usually not a compliment, right?

You know, I don't go to that church, because that's a fire and brimstone preacher. And we don't like to talk about judgment. We don't like to dwell on judgment. And I think there's good reason for not wanting to dwell on judgment, which is that if the gospel is what's most important to us, the gospel is good news, right?

[5 : 00] And any preacher whose primary message is judgment is by definition not a gospel preacher, because the gospel, it has to end in good news. It has to emphasize good news.

But, well, and Paul says that. Paul in Romans, he puts it like this. He says, How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace.

So the word of Jesus Christ is a gospel of peace. But at the same time, you have to say, if you ignore judgment altogether in the Bible, you're missing God's character.

Any preacher who doesn't talk about judgment at all misses the character of God, what he says about himself, but also misses why the gospel is so beautiful, because the gospel comes to us in the context of judgment.

And if you don't get the judgment, you can't get the gospel. You can't see why it's beautiful. So this morning, this morning judgment comes to the Ninevites.

[5 : 58] It's a painful, ugly word of judgment. And we're going to dwell on judgment this morning. So if you're visiting, and you go somewhere else today, and they say, What do they preach about at Columbia Press? You can say, All he preaches about is judgment.

And today you'd be right. We'll have mercy too. But it's mostly about judgment, because that's what most of this passage is talking about. And what I want to talk about today is why dwell on judgment?

Why even talk about it? Why can't we just talk about good news? And well, one reason why you have to talk about judgment is because if you're going to believe the Bible, the Bible says it's real and it's true.

And that's what happens to the Ninevites. They're faced with reality. So Jonah comes to them in verse four, and he comes into this city he's never been to before, and he tells them eight words.

Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. In Hebrew, it's just five words. And that doesn't mean that he just went throughout Nineveh and just said those five words over and over again.

[7 : 01] We're assuming that he's giving them a much bigger understanding of what's going on, but that was the core of his message. Forty days, this city, God is going to destroy this city. He's going to rain down on it.

And what is he doing? He is forcing the Ninevites to dwell on God's judgment. God has sent him to tell them about judgment in a way that they can't run from it anymore.

They have to come face to face with it, and they have to either decide that what Jonah is saying is true or it's not true. The one thing they can't do is just completely ignore it. And you've got to say, why would God do that?

Why would the God who we worship as the God of love, why would he go to a place and bring a message of judgment? And there's more than one answer to that question. Part of what he's doing here is he, when he sends Jonah to bring a message of judgment, the effect of that is that God is holding up a mirror to these people, showing them themselves and saying, this is what who you are has brought about.

Judgment shows us the consequences of who we are. So God is saying, what you've done in this world is so evil. To the Ninevites, I'm not even talking to y'all or to myself yet. Let's just talk about the Ninevites.

[8 : 21] He's saying to the Ninevites, what you've done is so evil that the only way that I can righteously deal with it is for me to just destroy this place in 40 days. And, you know, I don't know how that strikes you.

Do you like that idea of God? Do you like that picture of God that comes to a city and says, in 40 days, I'm going to destroy this place? You know, I certainly don't like to think about God judging me.

Right? I don't want to dwell on that. I don't want to dwell on the idea that God may be unhappy with who I am as a person. But let me just, I think we can all agree on this. Even though sometimes God's judgment makes us uncomfortable, at the same time, we want to believe that God is a judge.

And we want to believe that God punishes evil. Right? I mean, you look at all the nasty things in this world, the abuses, the violence, the bloodshed. Don't you want to believe that God looks at that?

And he doesn't just say, I don't care. But that he looks at all the unrighteousness in this world, the real suffering, and says, this is not okay. In fact, the language that the king of Nineveh uses, he says that God has fierce anger.

[9 : 32] Have you ever thought about God like that? He is love, but he also has fierce anger when he comes close to unrighteousness. That's what the king of Nineveh says, at least. And, you know, when I get angry, sometimes I get angry in a way that I should not be angry.

And all of us do that. And you can't look at God and say that his anger is like our anger. But you can still look at God and say, the kind of anger that God has when he sees sin is a just anger.

It's like when Jesus turns over the table, the tables in the temple, or when he gets mad when he goes to the tomb of Lazarus, because he's angry at death. That's the kind of anger that God has.

And we need a God like that. We need a God who looks at unrighteousness and says, this is not okay. That I won't let terrible things happen forever, because I'm going to judge it one day.

And if you were here the first week that we did the series in Jonah, I told you a little bit about the Ninevites. How they used to not just conquer their enemies, they would torture their enemies.

[10 : 38] And they would make these, I say beautiful, but I use that word cautiously, these very well-crafted monuments to the way that they would torture their enemies.

These were people who loved death, and they loved destruction, and they loved putting down their enemies, shaming them. And that's the kind of people that God is coming to and saying, you can't do this forever.

I won't let you do this forever, because I'm just, because I'm a God of justice. And as much as we don't want to believe in God's judgment sometimes, don't you want to believe in his justice, that he won't let evil things go on forever?

And that's part of what's going on here, is God is just saying, I will judge evil things. But then you can look at this, and you can say, well, what does that mean for me? It's one thing to say, God judged the Ninevites 3,000 years ago, but why does that matter to me today?

And there's a couple things you could say to that. One is, anytime you read a story in the Old Testament, one connection you can always draw to your own life is you can say, if this passage is telling me something about God, God never changes, and so this passage is telling me something that is always true about God.

[11 : 55] So you could say, well, at the very least, God always hates evil. He's always going to judge evil. But you can actually say more than that about this passage, because did you know, do you remember how Jesus actually uses this very story to explain himself?

You remember that? In the Gospel of Matthew, there's a great scene where the scribes and the Pharisees come to Jesus, and they're always trying to trick him up, and they say, Jesus, give us a sign.

Give us a sign, and we'll believe you. We'll believe everything you say. If you just give us a sign, show us that you really are who you say that you are. And one of those times that they came and did that, Jesus said this.

He said, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet of Jonah.

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Now listen to this.

[13 : 00] The story about Nineveh is so unrelated to our world. This is what Jesus says about that story to the Pharisees. He says to the Pharisees and the scribes, Do you see what he's saying?

He's saying, you remember those Ninevites, how evil they were? Oh, they were so evil. And yet, when Jonah came to them and said, Judgment is coming, what did they do?

Every single one of them repented and turned away from their evil ways. And yet Jesus is, he's looking at the scribes and the Pharisees and he's saying, Here I am, telling you that judgment is coming, bringing you a message of repentance, and you just ask for more signs.

And think about how this must have stung to a Pharisee, because in a Pharisee's eyes, you were either a son of Abraham or you were a nobody, right? And here Jesus is saying, Do you know that at the end of all time, the Ninevites, those evil people, they're going to stand up and they're going to look at you, scribes and Pharisees, and they're going to condemn you.

Why? Because they listened to God when God spoke. And you, all you ask for is another sign. You never listen to what I'm telling you. And someone greater than Jonah is here. So Jesus' message, gentle and lowly Jesus, he was, and he was a messenger of God's love.

[14 : 39] But you have to get Jesus' message, you have to understand the context of judgment. And one of the things that Jesus did so often is, he called his disciples, not just to think about God's love, and, you know, if I could preach every Sunday, hopefully almost every Sunday, we're talking more about God's love than about God's judgment.

But Jesus told his disciples to think about God's judgment. One of the most famous examples is one that you know. Do you remember when he's, he's trying to convince his disciples to take their own sin deadly seriously.

And he says this, he says, men, disciples, if your right hand causes you to stumble, what? You know, cut it off, throw it away.

Ouch. But then, here's why. He says, it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go to hell. That's Jesus.

But what Jesus is doing is he's saying, if you think about judgment, that will change the way that you think about your own life. And it'll change the way that you think about the sins.

[15 : 45] Because suddenly, you know, a lot of times we don't fight our sins, right? Because we think, it would, I'm not going to fight this sin because it would be too drastic, too much of a change in my life to try to wrestle with this thing.

Can't I just live comfortably with this sin? And Jesus is saying, oh no. Even if you've got to cut your hand off, and you could say that's a hyperbole, but he's still making a point here.

He's saying, it would be better to cut your hand off if that's what it took for you to stop sinning than for your whole body to be thrown into hell one day. That's Jesus, gentle and lowly, saying that. And, you know, so what?

Does that mean that Jesus is actually a messenger of God's judgment? I think there's a better way of putting it. If you think about what's actually going on in Jesus and in the story of Jonah, in both cases, isn't it true that the message of judgment is also at the very same time the message of mercy?

Because if you come to someone ahead of time and you tell them judgment is coming, that gives them a chance to turn away from whatever they're doing, from whatever danger they're facing. And you see, and eventually that's what happens with the Ninevites.

[17 : 00] Because Jonah so boldly told them about God's judgment, they turned away from it. So they didn't have to face it in the end. And that's what Jesus is doing. Sometimes, and we all, this is in every part of life, sometimes people give you a hard word, they warn you, they say, if you don't change, something bad's going to happen.

And you look back on that and you say, you know, at the time, I hated them for telling me that. But then you look back on your life and you say, in the end, that was a message of mercy to me.

It was just what I needed to turn before things got really bad in my life. WDAM, all those tornadoes that have been coming through the past few months, you know, isn't it so true that sometimes those weathermen are, they're out of their minds trying to figure out how can I convince these people of the danger they're in?

And I remember one time there was a, there was a younger woman who was assisting, I'm assuming we're all watching WDAM when the tornadoes come. So you got Patrick Bigby and then he had an assistant and I remember one time he turned it over to her and I think she was a bit caught off guard but he was telling, he was telling her, you tell these people how serious this is.

And I remember she said, she said, people, this is a potentially life-threatening storm. And then she says, no, no, this is a potentially life-ending storm. And so they were just trying to find the words to say because there's always that person who says, there may be tornadoes but I don't need to worry about it until it's over your head.

[18 : 36] And you don't look at somebody like Patrick Bigby, nice guy that he is, you don't say, how dare he tell me this bad news? What do you say? Thank you, Patrick. You saved my life.

The messenger of warning is someone who's merciful to us. And that's what Jonah is in this passage. Unwillingly, we might add, because you know, Jonah doesn't want these people to find mercy.

And one of the reasons he doesn't want to go to Nineveh is because he knows if he tells them about God's judgment, they may turn and they may find mercy. There's a power, all that to say, there's a power that comes from thinking about God's judgment because it shows us how seriously God really takes sin.

And as good as it is to dwell on the hope that we have of heaven, sometimes we need to think about God's judgment and let that inform the way that we think about the sin that's in our own lives.

So, because the Ninevites did that, two things happened. There were two turns, and that's what I want to finish with this morning. Two turns that you see in this passage. The first one is the turn of repentance.

[19 : 48] what does God do? What does he accomplish by telling these people all this bad news? Well, he actually draws them to himself, right?

So, the people, they listen. It says, what's the language that he uses? It says, the people believed God and they called for a fast, put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least.

And what I think is so interesting about this moment is it's almost exactly what happens to Jonah in the chapter earlier. Remember, last week, Jonah was in the belly of the whale.

He was down at the bottom of the sea. And we talked about how the mercy of that was that God brought Jonah basically to the point of death. He brought him to the place where the only hope that Jonah had was to cry out to God.

And that's the lesson that Jonah needed to learn. He needed to learn that that was the only hope that he ever has in this life. That's the only hope that all of us have is simply depending on God. So, he brought him to the lowest point so that he would cry out.

[20 : 56] And that's what God does to the Ninevites. He brings them to the lowest point where they finally see how bad they are. But he doesn't do that just to humiliate them. He does that so that they will cry out to him.

And that's what they do. They cry out to him. And, you know, what can we say about repentance? If you're a Christian, if I'm a Christian, we're called to have faith.

But the evidence of that faith, part of the evidence of that faith is always repentance. Everybody who ever turns to God has to have repentance come with it. And you see what kind of, these people, you know, there's people who repent and then there's people who repent.

and these people repented. And Jonah goes, he explains just how repentant they are. They do things that you never see anywhere else in the Bible. So, first of all, it starts with the king and it touches the whole place.

But did you notice that the king even made the animals repent? He says, dress the animals in sackcloth. And he tells everyone, even the animals, you can't eat any food and you can't drink any water.

[22 : 03] What is fasting and the sackcloth? What does that all mean? It's all a way of communicating to God how seriously these people take their own sin.

That's all they're doing. It's not like every time that you sin you need to dress in sackcloth. But it is saying sometimes it takes a radical break from what we've done in the past to turn to God.

And that's what's going on here. And, well, what do we make of this? Well, repentance is always a turn, right? But there's one other thing that I want to point out about repentance here is that it doesn't just have to do with God.

It's not just about saying, well, I need to offer my sacrifices to God and he'll welcome me back. What you notice is when the king realizes the need for repentance, he doesn't just say, let's pray to God, let's offer sacrifices to him, even though that's probably the most essential part.

but he also, he tells the Ninevites our whole lives have to change. You see that down in verse 7, he says, no, in verse 8, he says, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

[23 : 22] So he's looking at this nation and he's saying, our whole walk, that's kind of the way that, the way that the Old Testament describes your way of life is your walk, your way. And the king is saying, our whole walk is off.

Our whole walk is evil. We've got to turn from all of that. And he tells them, we have to turn from everything about who we are and towards God and what he loves and cherishes.

And, you know, a lot of us, I'm coming to a close here, but a lot of us, myself included, sometimes we can think about Christianity like it's, you become a Christian by repenting and then you just love God after that.

But any theologian of the past and the Bible itself, it always talks about repentance like it's more than just what you do when you become a Christian. If you're really a Christian, if it's real faith, repentance is a way of life.

Do you remember when Martin Luther, he started the Reformation, he nailed those 95 theses to the door in Wittenberg and it was 95 complaints that he had against the Catholic Church.

[24 : 32] But his first, the first thing that he wrote, number one, was this. He says, when the Lord, when our Lord and Master said repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

So, what Luther's saying is if we're really Christians, then we're people who are saying our whole life is repentance every day, day in, day out. And one of the challenges is maybe the longer you become a Christian, the more hidden our sins can be because we've kind of given up the big things, at least what we feel like are the big things, but what the Bible says is all of us have sin lurking in our hearts and there's a great line in C.S. Lewis.

C.S. Lewis, he wrote that book Screwtape Letters where a demon, Screwtape Letters is a fictional story where one demon is trying to convince his little nephew who's also a demon how to trick Christians, how to make them fall away.

And it's a powerful book because it makes you think, you know, if Satan wanted to trick me, how would he do it? And one of the things that the elder demon says to the younger demon is he says, don't make your patient, don't make this Christian that you're trying to lead astray, don't make him commit big sins, don't worry about big sins.

All you have to do is just bring him inch by inch further away from his God. It's the little things that matter and this is what he writes. He says, he says to his little nephew, you will say that these are very small sins and doubtless, like all young tempters, you're anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness.

[26 : 09] But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from God. It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the light and out into nothing.

Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, and without signposts.

You know, sometimes we need to dwell on God's judgment because it reminds us that even our little sins, it's enough to separate us from God if we're not careful. It's always enough to separate us from God and if we're not careful, it will.

Eternally. And that's what the demon is saying here. Now, I said I was about to close, but I've actually got another thing to say. One last thing. God's mercy.

That's where the passage ends. It doesn't end in judgment, it ends in mercy because, you know, God had, if we're, if we're going to see mercy, if you're going to see God's mercy, you have to be willing to say, if God put me in hell, he would be right to do so.

[27 : 28] And if you're going to see God's mercy in Jonah, you have to be willing to say, if he destroyed Nineveh, he would have been just to do so. But then, what the Bible also says about God's mercy is this.

He says this in Ezekiel. He says, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He'll judge in order to be just, but he says, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their evil ways and live.

He's talking to the Israelites here. He says, turn, turn from your evil ways. Why will you die? Why will you die? He offers mercy to Jonah into the Ninevites.

A question to end with, and then I'll say a little bit after the question. One thing that this passage doesn't tell us is how God can both be just and merciful.

Because if you want to be, if you want God to be just, it's hard to see how he can be merciful at the same time. You know, you don't want a judge in a courtroom in Marion County to let a murderer go free and call it mercy.

[28 : 43] No, you want to see justice. That's what we all want. And every passage like this makes us say, it's wonderful that he's merciful, but what about the justice? What about all those victims?

Do they not get any kind of recompense? justice? And the Bible doesn't give you that answer until you get to Jesus because it's not until you see Jesus that you see how he can both offer mercy and provide justice at the same time.

Because if these people really placed their hope in God, then there was justice. There was justice done for all the evil things that they did and it was put on the back of Jesus Christ.

That's the amazing part about what Christianity has to say to the world is that God can both look at you and say that you're unrighteous and you deserve justice and that you can find mercy at the same time without God losing his justice because all the wrong things we've ever done can be put on Jesus Christ.

And when God looks at you and says, I love you, he's being just because when he sees you, he sees Jesus Christ if you're a believer because Jesus Christ lives inside of us.

[29 : 59] That's beautiful. We can dwell on God's judgment and if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, the more you think about it, the more you should say, if God is so just, how much must he love me?

I said that sentence not very well. If God is so just, how much must he love me that he allowed his son to go in my place?

Let's pray. Lord, you're good, you're just, and somehow you're merciful at the same time. Help us to praise that, worship that God every day.

In your son's name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.