

# The City That Heard And Acted

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[ 0 : 00 ] What an amazing story. What a wonderful miracle. Greater than the miracle of the sending of the great fish, for which the prophet Jonah is more famously known.

And greater than most of the miracles recorded in the Old and New Testaments. An entire city. An entire city made up of 120,000 people by God's own count.

An entire city about whom God says, the great city. An entire city about whom God says, I think with great compassion, they don't know their right hand from their left hand.

An entire city hears a message said to be from God. An initially offensive message. The city takes it seriously, so seriously, that the entire city moves into this deep time of repentance.

And as is promised to everyone who repents, they discover mercy and grace and are given a new lease on life. What a wonderful miracle.

[ 1 : 13 ] One for which many of us pray in our time. We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city and beyond.

Printed on all our official publications, it is our identity and mission statement. We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city and beyond.

Now, I don't want to sound like a broken record. As I observed in the first service, there are probably many of you too young to know what a broken record really is anyway. But I do not want to sound like a broken record.

But I have been suggesting the past weeks that we make a small adjustment in our identity and mission statement. The small adjustment has large implications.

I suggest that we change the article A to the pronoun his so that it reads, and instead of a heart for the city, his heart for the city.

[ 2 : 13 ] You're welcome to do that on your bulletin cover right now. Take a pencil, scratch out the A, and put the pronoun his. I think this little change will help make for more authentic Christian community, on the one hand, and I think it will make for the possibility of the city experiencing this Nineveh-like miracle, on the other hand.

We are a community following Jesus with his heart for the city. And as far as I'm concerned, his heart is no more clearly revealed than in the Old Testament book of Jonah.

The book of Jonah is all about the holy, living God's heart for cities. It's all about the holy, living God's feelings for cities.

Not just God's vision for cities. Not just God's ideas about cities. Not just God's plans and purposes for cities. But God's feelings. And the book then is all about God getting his people to feel for the city what he feels for the city.

And in the miracle recorded for us in Jonah 3, we see where God's feelings are going to lead. God's feelings lead to an entire city, a Gentile city, repenting at the preaching of a reluctant Jewish prophet.

[ 3 : 46 ] Repenting. Do not be put up by this word repent. It's a really good word. It simply means changing your mind.

It means thinking again. Thinking in a new way. This is something every growing and maturing adult is doing all the time. There's no way to grow without repenting.

Changing our minds. Thinking new ways. In light of Jonah's reluctant preaching, the people of Nineveh were finally facing, and they implicitly knew, but did not want to face.

They were finally facing that they were heading in the wrong direction. All of their misery and their troubles said as much. In light of Jonah's preaching, they realized that they were making decisions that had inherently troubling consequences.

They were realizing that they were adopting behaviors and lifestyles that had inherent misery-making results.

[ 4 : 54 ] And in light of Jonah's preaching, they realized that they had to repent. That they had to change their thinking. That they had to change their mind. They realized that for the good of the city, for the well-being of the city, they had to make a U-turn in the road.

And they did it. Centuries later, the Apostle Peter would capture the essence of God's heart. 2 Peter 3.9 God is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance. Paul, as he preached to the cities of the Roman Empire, would hold up God's heart again in 1 Timothy 2.4 God, our Savior, desires all men and women to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

And so, this 7th century before Christ, city of Nineveh, a leading city of the Assyrian Empire, a leading city of the much-feared Assyrian Empire, the leading city of the hated enemy of Israel, at the preaching of a Jewish prophet, a reluctant Jewish prophet, hears and repents.

And God relents. The people find mercy and grace. And the prophet is angry. So angry, he tells God he wants to die.

[ 6 : 15 ] Something's wrong with this picture. No? No? Why is he angry? Why does he not rejoice in this miracle? Because Jonah does not like what God feels for the city.

Jonah does not want to feel for the city what God feels for the city. Jonah wants the city, the very bad, very nasty, very immoral, very unjust, very corrupt, very violent, celebrating, war-making city, destroyed.

Jonah. He wants the city wiped off the map. Jonah does not want his and his people's enemy finding mercy and grace. Let's briefly review the storyline.

God calls to the prophet, Rise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out against it because its wickedness has come up to me. As I've been pointing out, wickedness is only one possible meaning of the Hebrew word that's used here.

Many people are saying now that the primary meaning of this word is trouble. Go to Nineveh and preach to Nineveh because its trouble has come up to me.

[ 7 : 31 ] Jonah does not want to go and preach. It is his vocation. It's his calling in life. He's supposed to preach. He's supposed to speak the living word of God whenever and wherever he is told to do so, but he will not do it.

So he tries to flee from the presence of Yahweh. And he discovers what he had known that he could not do it. Jonah tries to do what no human being can do.

He ends up on the sea, heading in the wrong direction, and he ends up in the sea, heading down, down, down. But the living God, Yahweh is his name, wants this disobedient prophet to experience mercy and grace.

So Yahweh goes after him, on the sea and in the sea. Yahweh sends a great fish who rescues Jonah, heaving him then up on the dry land. Presumably, Jonah then makes his way back to Jerusalem.

And there the word of the Lord comes a second time. Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim the proclamation which I will tell you to say.

[ 8 : 39 ] That is, go and speak what I tell you to speak. The implication being only what I tell you to speak. The implication being nothing less and nothing more. And so he goes, reluctantly, but he does go.

And he goes, fearing the worst. Not that the city will reject him and his preaching, which is what I fear. He goes, fearing that the city will actually listen and repent.

His great fear is that Nineveh is going to experience mercy and grace when he preaches. I mean, something's really wrong with this picture.

Finally, he arrives at the place he does not want to go to do what he does not want to do. The text says that Nineveh is an exceedingly great city. Literally, it is a great city to God.

Meaning that this city is important to God, great to God, much on God's mind and heart. The text also says it took three days to go through it. Or, in other versions, a three-day walk.

[ 9 : 50 ] walk. Now, this idiom, a three-day walk, does not refer to how long it takes to traverse the city limits. The idiom three days refers to the fact that when someone visited, when there was a formal visit to an ancient Near Eastern city, it involved a three-day protocol.

Old Testament scholar Donald Wiseman says that the idiom refers to the ancient oriental practice of hospitality, whereby the first day is for arrival, the second day for the primary purpose of the visit, and the third day for return.

So, Jonah enters Nineveh. Nineveh is a major diplomatic center in the ancient Near East. He enters that city as an official emissary who enters, works, and leaves according to protocol.

First day, Jonah will tell the people who he is and why he has come. Second day, Jonah will go about his business. Third day, Jonah will leave bidding formal adieu.

But, and this is what surprises Jonah and us, the miracle begins the first day. On the first day, he has only just begun to tell the city why he has come, and they start repenting.

[ 11 : 14 ] On the first day, he would tell them what he would be saying the second day. Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown. And on the first day, people start responding. The text says the people believed in God.

In other chapters of Jonah, the term is the name Yahweh, God's self-revelatory name. In Nineveh, God is not yet known as Yahweh, only by the generic term God, Elohim.

But at least they believed that much, and they acted on that much. And they call a fast on the very first day. A fast. They repent so fully that they feel they have to change their clothes.

They need to put on sack cloth. Sack cloth in the ancient Near East is a sign that you are turning around. It's a sign that you are mourning and seeking. And then the news reaches the king in Nineveh.

And he responds. The text says, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sack cloth, and sat in ashes. This is amazing. A powerful ruler of a city learns of this new people power movement going on in the city, and he joins it.

[ 12 : 22 ] Because he's a political opportunist, and he wants to demonstrate to the electorate that I'm one of you. No. The king also repents with the people because he realizes, in light of Jonah's preaching, that his own policies are causing trouble for the city.

God is God saw their deeds.

Their theology had not yet become all that it needs to be. God is still this generic God, not yet the Yahweh, the great I am. But their actions speak volumes.

The fact is, repentance is finally only revealed in actions. And God sees in the actions of these people true faith and true repentance.

And the text says, God relented, the people rejoiced, and the prophet. God is ticked. Now, this amazing story, this wonderful miracle, raises so many questions, does it not?

[ 13 : 43 ] I could see it in your eyes as I was looking at you as we brought along. So many questions. Let me just address three at this point of the story. Next week, we'll pick up on some more when we look at Jonah 4.

Just three questions. Question one, why did the city repent? Yet 40 days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.

That's not a very impressive sermon. It's pretty negative, wouldn't you say? It's sort of in your face. I mean, this is really judgmental.

Then why did the city repent? In light of that one sentence, that one line word, from this prophet?

Well, for one thing, there are some worldview dynamics that work here.

Worldview dynamics we do not share with our city. The people of Nineveh, along with all the other people in the world at that time, lived with a much bigger worldview than most of us do.

[ 14 : 51 ] They lived with a transcendent worldview. That is, they believed that there is more to reality than you can know with your unaided senses. These people, imagine, believed in a god.

They believed there were gods and a god. And so, when a prophet comes in the name of a god, they're inclined to give this prophet and this prophet's god a hearing.

On the first day of the three-day visit, they welcome this visiting preacher who comes in the name of a god. Another reason the city repents. There are some historical dynamics at work here, historical dynamics which we do not share.

As we've noted in our other studies in Jonah, Nineveh experienced a lot of misery, trouble as God called it. They were experiencing famine, there was flood, there was potential invasion from other powers, parts of the empire were already falling, there were losses on the battlefield and losses in the diplomatic front, there were social unrest, there were even riots in the city streets.

But most troubling was the strange confluence of natural phenomena, an earthquake and a solar eclipse. Now, Donald Wiseman, who I quoted earlier on, was an expert in all things Assyrian. [16:14] He translated a number of Assyrian documents that seek to interpret these natural phenomena people took as signs and omens. And these documents would predict what sort of things might happen on the heels of, let's say, a solar eclipse.

And so we read things like, the king will be disposed and killed, and worthless fellows will seize his throne. The king will die, rain from heaven will flood the land, there will be famine, a deity will strike the king and fire consume the land, the city walls will be destroyed.

So scholars ask, was not the king in Nineveh predisposed to receive some sort of word from some sort of prophet who might know some sort of God about this situation.

Now, we in our time do not think in those ways. Yet, are not many people in our time fearfully asking, what is going on in the world? What does all this unrest in the world mean?

What does all the uncertainty and volatility of the financial markets mean? What does all the change in world weather patterns mean? another reason why Nineveh repents.

[17:26] It is the performative power of the word of God, a factor which we do share with our city. When God speaks, something happens.

Always. When the living God, the God who made the universe, speaks, something happens.

Always. My word which goes forth from my mouth will not return to me empty without achieving the matter for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55 11. It's the text I throw my whole weight on as I stand before you. God's word makes things happen.

Always. Not immediately obvious, but always eventually. God's word bears fruit. Even when the word is not initially inviting.

That's what I want to stress. this works even when God's word is not initially invited. I have a friend who says that he was converted by reading one line out of the book of Leviticus.

[18:31] He worked as an airline pilot and one night during a very troubling time, he took the Gideon Bible that had providentially been placed there in the hotel nightstand and he randomly flipped through the Bible and he landed at Leviticus 19.

2. You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy. And he says that was the moment that salvation began for him. I have another friend who was converted by reading one line from the Apostle Paul.

Again, he's in a hotel room. Again, he picks up the Gideon Bible. Thank God for the Gideon Bible. And he randomly turns to Galatians 6. 7. Do not be deceived.

God is not mocked. What a man sows, he will reap. And he says that text started him on a new path, off the path that he was going.

And he dates his salvation to that moment with that text. When God, when Yahweh speaks, something happens. And then there's one more reason why Nineveh repented.

[19:38] As I said two weeks ago, this word of warning is a word of grace. The fact that God even bothers to speak means there's opportunity for change.

And Nineveh hears this word, yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown, as a word of grace. And it is. It's full of grace because it means that God is not yet finished with us.

You see, if this judgment were irrevocably decreed, God would not even bother to speak. God would just give the city what it deserves. Destruction.

He would give it what Jonah wants it to have. As we put it on other occasions, justice is God giving us what we deserve. Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve.

And grace is God giving us what we do not deserve. And the word of warning is shot through with mercy and grace. grace. Which brings us then to the second question I want to ask at this point in the story.

[20:42] Question two. What was the warning? Or, put it differently, what would have happened to the city if it did not listen and repent? You are not going to like the answer.

The city would have collapsed into its trouble. The city would have gotten what it deserved. Its immoral choices, its corrupt choices, its celebration of violence would finally turn in on itself.

That is, the city would experience to the full extent the inherent consequences of its sinful choices. Yes, sometimes the judgment comes in direct overt form, outright overthrowing.

But most of the time, judgment comes in a worse form, a much worse form, a much worse form.

Most of the time, judgment comes in God letting us have our way. In the Bible, the wrath of God is not an emotional outrage.

[ 22 : 05 ] In the Bible, the wrath of God is not thunder and lightning bolts. It's far worse than that. Far worse. The wrath of God is God giving us over to the consequences of the choices we make. It is awful. I would rather have thunder and lightning bolts. It would be less painful and a whole lot less agonizing.

You might know that the Apostle Paul wrestles with all of this in his letter to the Romans. In that great epistle he wrote to the capital of the Roman Empire. And there Paul lists all kinds of expressions of human brokenness and all kinds of signs that human community is breaking down. And many people say that it is because of these things that wrath is going to come. And Paul says no. These things are the wrath of God. These things are God letting us have our way. God is letting us have the full consequences of the choices that we are making. We are inheriting the consequences of sinful choices. Paul uses the phrase three times. God handed them over. God handed them over.

[ 23 : 15 ] God handed them over. Boy, the longer I live and especially in these last years, I find myself praying, please do not do that. Anyone join me in that? Please do not hand me.

God, don't hand me over. Don't hand me over to the implications of some of the choices I make. Don't hand the city over to the choices the city is making. Don't do it, God. Please don't do it. That's much worse.

Nineveh hears in Jonah's preaching, grace, God does not want to hand the city over to its own ways. God wants it to find mercy and grace in a newly sun life. Forty days.

It's not a statistic, it's a symbol. Forty is the symbol for a time of cleansing and purging. Israel's in the desert, forty years to be purged. Forty is the call to turn around.

Forty simply says there is time. Yet forty days in Nineveh will be overthrown. Overthrown. The Hebrew word in Jonah's one-line sermon has many meanings, as we're discovering with most Hebrew words.

[ 24 : 22 ] Yes, it does mean overthrow, but it also means turning upside down, a reversal, a change, and it means a change of heart.

As Douglas Stewart puts it, Jonah's message could mean both. In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown, and in forty days Nineveh will have a change of heart.

The city, recognizing the ambiguity in this word, takes Jonah's preaching to be shot through with grace, and understands it as an invitation to turn around.

Which is why on the very first day the miracle kicks in, on the very first day of the three-day visit, the Ninevites recognize that their misery is mostly their own doing, and they do not want the consequences, the full consequences of these decisions, nor does God.

Which is why God sends a messenger with a message. Which brings us then to the third question I want to raise. Question three, what is the message for our city?

[ 25 : 33 ] And here now I go way out on the limb and feel very vulnerable. we are a community following Jesus with his heart for the city.

So what is the message his heart leads us to give to the city? Well, how much time do you have? I do not think the message is Jonah's one-line proclamation.

I don't think any of us is going to be called to take a placard out on the street today, 40 days, and Vancouver will be overthrown. If God says to do it, we'll do it. But I don't think he does.

For one thing, since the coming of Jesus, the message is so much more grand. And for another, the cultural dynamics in our city are so very different from the cultural dynamics in the city of Nineveh.

I mean, tell me about it. Jonah can walk into the city, introduce himself as a prophet of the living God, and get a hearing. Walk into our city and say something like, God sent me?

[ 26 : 35 ] I don't think so. we are in a place where we can only speak when we've been invited to speak. We're in a place where we can only speak when someone gives us the privilege to speak.

And as you know, we have a lot of strikes against us to ever get that privilege. St. Francis of Assisi was purported to have said, go preach the gospel and, if necessary, use words.

words. Now, that's good advice because actions are as loud as words, and sometimes actions are louder than words. But as Dwayne Lifton, who is the former president of Wheaton College, has recently pointed out, St. Francis never said that.

He would have never said that. And more to the point, we cannot preach the gospel without words. You can live the gospel without words. And living the gospel without words can create the context where the gospel can be heard.

But we cannot preach good news without good words. So, what are we to speak to our city? There are, of course, all kinds of one-line sermons in the scripture.

[ 27 : 44 ] John 3, 16. Not bad. God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Or, 2 Corinthians 5, 19. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them. How's that for a one-liner?

What I'd like to do now is offer to you what I think I am supposed to speak. If I were given the opportunity to speak to the city, if the city were to extend to me the hospitality of a three-day visit, and I were to follow protocol, if I were given the opportunity to speak on television, to say what the message is, I can give it in 10 minutes.

Here it goes. Well, actually, I've written it down for you. So, can I have my friends pass this out to you? If I had 10 minutes on television, or 10 minutes at City Hall, this is what I would say.

You can upload this from the website right now, it's there. So, if you're listening to this sermon on the internet, just turn to that on the website. Okay, this takes me about 10 minutes to do.

[ 29 : 07 ] I'm going to do that, and then we'll see. Camera's rolling. There is more to reality than meets the unaided senses.

More than can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched. More than can be detected by electron microscopes and stored on any supercomputer. At the center of all things is a relationship.

This is the most fundamental truth I know and believe. This relationship has always existed and always will. This relationship was there before the world came into being.

This relationship was there before we humans came on the scene. This relationship is between persons, more specifically, between a father and a son. There was never time when the father was not a father and thus never time when the son was not a son.

This relationship itself is so alive that it too is a breathing, a spirit, a person, whom the Bible calls the Holy Spirit.

[ 30 : 17 ] This relationship at the center of all things is marked by interdependence, mutual indwelling, deep intimacy, self-giving love, creativity, and joy.

This relationship can use the pronouns I, me, mine, and also the pronouns we, us, our. By this relationship we were created, for this relationship we were created, we were brought into being to enjoy the relationship's us-ness.

We were brought into being to enter into and enjoy interdependence, mutual indwelling, deep intimacy, self-giving love, creativity, and joy. We human beings, sadly, turned our backs on this great fact, this great gift.

This is what the Bible calls sin, and why even good people are sinners. All of our misery is due to this turning away. Because we have turned away from the only source of life there is, we live in alienation, suspicion, blame, shame, inability to see clearly, bondage or addiction to forces beneath our dignity, decay, and death.

We were made for relationship, which is why broken relationships hurt more than broken bones.

The living God, this relationship, did not and has not turned away from us.

[ 31 : 36 ] The living God comes after us. The purpose of creation will not be thwarted by the willful rejection of mere mortals. God's coming after us began right after the first humans turned away.

God's coming after us was expressed most intentionally, but not exclusively, in the long history of God's dealings with the family of Abraham and Sarah. To Abraham and Sarah, God made a promise that one day, one of their offspring would be the source of blessing to the whole world.

In you, all the families of the earth will be blessed, God said. That's the line that Jonah forgot. The promise was reiterated and restated many times throughout this long history, this long story of relentless pursuit.

This story led, slowly but surely, to the living God choosing to become the offspring promised to Abraham and Sarah. The story led inexorably to God coming to earth in person, more exactly, God the Son coming to earth in person.

When God came in person, God took on the name Jesus, which is English for the Hebrew Yeshua, meaning God as salvation, or more dynamically, God to the rescue. The theological term for this

amazing move of the living God is incarnation, the creator of all things, taking on human flesh and blood.

[ 32 : 52 ] Have you ever heard anything so utterly fantastic? In the incarnation, the living God lives out for us in our flesh and blood 24-7, the life we were originally created and designed to live.

In Jesus, we see embodied those marks of the relationship at the center of the universe.

Interdependency, mutual indwelling, deep intimacy, self-giving love, creativity, and joy.

22. In the incarnation, the living God amazingly and mercifully takes on the totality of the human condition. That is, God makes our experience of life God's own.

God takes on human pain. God takes on human sin. God takes on the judgment human sin rightly deserves. This taking on is happening throughout the earthly days of the incarnation, but especially and ultimately in Jesus' death on a Roman cross.

More was happening at that cross than anyone at that moment could know. More than anyone since has been able to adequately capture and articulate. In that death, the relationship at the center of all things does everything that needs to be done in order for human beings to be brought back into the original purpose of creation.

[ 34 : 10 ] On the cross Jesus cries out, it is finished. What is finished? God's anger against human sin and what it has done to humans and God's good creation is resolved, fully expressed against God's self.

God defeats the powers that hold human beings in bondage by death, defeats it by death, and God rescues us from those powers. I left that one out. God the judge acquits us, pardon in full.

God reconciles us. God made us God's friends. God removes all barriers to intimacy with God.

God's heart is open wide. Three days later, Jesus was crucified and laid in a borrowed tomb.

He emerged on the other side of death alive. This is the event we call the resurrection. In this one

man, death finally did not have the last word. It only had the second to the last word. And for anyone who enters into relationship with the living Jesus, death will not have the last word either.

The last word is life. Jesus is alive and now the head of a new human race. Understandably, he now calls us to turn around, repent is the word usually used, and follow me into a new quality of life.

[ 35 : 16 ] This understandably involves learning a new way of life, a new lifestyle with new drives, new appetites, new priorities, new motives, new vision, new power, the power of the Holy Spirit making it all happen.

Following the man who is God, the God who is man, leads to full participation in God's interdependence, God's mutual indwelling, God's deep intimacy, God's self-giving love, God's creativity, God's joy.

This participation is what Jesus means by the kingdom of God, which he calls us to seek first. If that were not enough, he comes to live with us and to live in us, who can it really be, through the Holy Spirit, the breathing between the Father and the Son, empowering us to live the relationship's quality of life.

Because of his death and resurrection, Jesus is now already the master of the universe. The actual term the Bible uses is Lord, meaning sovereign one or sovereign of sovereigns. His sovereign rule or dominion or administration is presently ordinarily hidden.

It is not obvious to everyone right now, but the ordinarily hidden is surprisingly made manifest in everyday apparently insignificant acts of self-giving servant love.

[ 36 : 35 ] One day, all of this will become visible to all. Jesus will break through, the word is apocalypse, from behind the hiddenness, and everyone will finally realize and confess that he is indeed master.

And given who we discover him to be, whom else would you want to have as master? Every day, the relationship at the center of all things is working to bring about a fully recreated creation, where there is no sin, and therefore none of the consequences of sin, and where we will finally, fully, freely participate in God's interdependence, God's mutual indwelling, God's deep intimacy, God's self-giving love, God's creativity, and God's joy.

Nothing can ultimately thwart God, the relationship accomplishing this grand purpose. Nothing.

There is more to reality than meets the unaided senses. Come, the relationship says, every day, come home, just turn around, and come home to your true home, the way home is open wide, and you are welcome to come all the way in.

And the city found mercy, grace, and new life, and the preacher was really happy.