

Jonah's Mission (4): Jonah Gets A Second Chance

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- [0 : 0 0] Please turn again with me to Jonah chapter 3 and verses 1 through 4 as Jonah the prophet gets another call.
- Jonah the prophet gets another call. You know the more I study it, the more I realize the book of Jonah is a work of supreme genius.
- Only God could have inspired such a masterpiece as this, weaving together as it does divine theology and human psychology.
- The prophet Jonah, let me remind you, stands as a representative of the nation of Israel, a people blessed by God with salvation and commanded to proclaim that salvation to the whole earth.
- But a people who turned in upon themselves and refused to share it with anyone. Why should the Gentiles share in the blessing of our salvation?
- [1 : 0 9] Why not just keep it all to ourselves? Jonah lived 3,000 years ago, but the message of his life is uncannily contemporary.
- We as a Christian church have been called to go and make disciples of all nations. We are Jonah. Jonah is no longer a first millennium BC Jewish prophet, but a 21st century Gentile church in Glasgow.
- We are Jonah. But to return to the genius of Jonah, the ultimate reason it is we as the church, whom God is calling to proclaim his salvation to the nations.
- The ultimate reason it's we as a church is because they, the Old Testament nation of Israel, failed in their task.
- This is one of the most beautiful passages in the whole book, and this evening I want us to explore it together under four brief headings.
- [2 : 1 9] The mercy of God in verse 1, the mission of God in verse 2, the man of God in verse 3, and the message of God in verse 4.
- Remember, the message of Jonah, it goes far deeper than a seagoing fish. In many ways, it's the story of the whole Bible.
- It's the foundation of the church. It provides the backdrop against which Jesus calls us to go and make disciples of all the nations. First of all then, the mercy of God in verse 1, the mercy of God.
- A former minister of mine, Reverend Colin Jones from when we lived in London, he had a beautiful Welsh accent, and he once told me that this was his favorite verse in the Bible.
- Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time. The second time. How often in our experience as servants of Christ does God need to call to us the second time?
- [3 : 3 0] We're so deaf, so stubborn, the first is rarely enough. And God called to Jonah the second time. Now the substance of the call is little different from that of the first.
- Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city. As we've seen for the past few, three weeks, Jonah had heard God's call, but had refused to obey God's call.

What we've got here in verse 1 is a demonstration of the supreme mercy of God. Jonah had proved himself to be unfaithful, unreliable, and disobedient.

Rather than turning west in obedience to God's call, rather than turning east in obedience to God's call, he turned west in disobedience to God's call.

Instead, he did the exact opposite of what God had told him to do. He defied the God of all grace. Jonah resented the gracious love of God for all human beings, and so he ran away.

[4 : 39] Now, if I was God, and you should be very thankful that I'm not, having been let down by Jonah, I'd have said to myself, what a particularly useless human being Jonah is.

This is the last time I let him anywhere near my divine perfect purposes for humanity. I'll let his boat sink in the storm, or that great fish, instead of swallowing him up, I'll let him bite him in two, but I'll certainly never use him again.

After all, what does a man like Jonah deserve? If I was God, I'd be just, and I'd be righteous, and I'd give Jonah exactly what he deserved at this point, a deep blue sea in which to rot.

Because that's the kind of world Jonah lives in, right? An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth type mindset. That's the way that Jonah thought about the city of Nineveh, and one of the reasons he was so reluctant to proclaim the message of God there.

Those Ninevites, they're vicious people. They're unclean Gentiles. They're Gentile idolaters. God should not be showing mercy to them.

[5 : 57] He should be giving them just what they deserve, and no more divine condemnation. They're evil people. God should condemn them. Jonah lives in a world of karma.

You get what you deserve in life. No more, no less. The thing is, our God doesn't delight in judgment, but in mercy.

Not in wrath, but in grace. He demonstrates his mercy to sinners in giving his son to the cross for them. He proves his mercy to his enemies by emptying himself and becoming their servant.

He shows mercy to the most unlikely of candidates. As Fiona said this morning in her prayer, a Babylonian king called Nebuchadnezzar, a strict Pharisee called Saul of Tarsus, perhaps even, we pray, a Russian president called Vladimir Putin.

God lives in a world of mercy and grace where we do not get the condemnation we deserve, but we do get the blessings we don't.

[7 : 10] So again, if I'd been God, Jonah being unreliable and undependable and unfaithful, I don't let him sink. Jonah 3.1 reminds us of God's mercy.

Those we throw in the rubbish pile because they've failed before are the very people God calls and gives a second chance to. They deserve the rubbish pile, but God's more gracious than we are and his mercy is always more.

For all its reluctance to be a light to the nations and to spread the word of God's steadfast love. The nation of Israel deserved to be thrown on the rubbish pile.

God could have adopted Egypt instead. It might have done a better job. But time and again, God gives Israel the second chance. Because remember, Jonah stands as representative of the nation of Israel and Israel, God is giving another chance to to preach his grace to a world lost in sin.

What will they do with the mercy of God? Will they continue to abuse the patience of God? Or will they learn the lesson for themselves not just to enjoy God's grace, but to proclaim it to the nations?

[8 : 35] Now, all of us, every one of us, are in need of the mercy of God in salvation. But there are some of us here perhaps who are in special need of God's mercy tonight.

you have messed up or are in the process of messing up your spiritual life, your Christian life.

Perhaps, perhaps, you know that God's called you to serve him in a particular way. But like Jonah, you're just refusing and saying no. Or you're just walking in the wrong direction.

Perhaps, you've messed up your relationship with Jesus by not walking in holiness or by ignoring him. You haven't read your Bible for months, you haven't prayed for years.

You know, we talk sometimes about marriages being irretrievably broken. They cannot be restored and it's tragic to even use words like irretrievably broken.

[9 : 39] But our relationship to God, and this is the precious truth, is never irretrievably broken. Our relationship to God is never irretrievably broken, nor will our call to serve God be irretrievably lost.

Because we serve a God of the second chance and the third chance and the fourth chance. For anyone here tonight in particular who feels that way and who wants a new beginning in your Christian life, take heart from this verse in Jonah 3 verse 1.

This verse my old minister Colin Jones used to love so much. And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time. Second, we have here in these verses the mission of God in verse 2.

The mission of God arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message I tell you. The mission of God here is substantially the same as that we find in Jonah chapter 1.

And it involved three things. It involves in the first instance activity. Activity. God says to Jonah arise, go.

[10 : 56] Now we know from the history of the ancient world that the city of Nineveh was many hundreds of miles away from where Jonah lived. So of course preaching in Nineveh is going to involve a fair journey.

But there's more to it than that. Arise, go, mean the same thing. Tautology. So why is God saying the same thing twice?

Arise, go. Go is easy to understand, right? It involves traveling all those hundreds of miles to Nineveh. Arise has a slightly different emphasis. Now suppose you're sitting around your house being lazy, which we all do from time to time, right?

There's something you need to do but you can't quite summon up the energy to do it. And finally you say to yourself, get off off your backside and just do it.

It's our way of telling ourselves to stop being lazy. Get up off your backside and just do it. And arise is Old Testament speak for, get up off your backside, Jonah.

[12 : 02] My mission involves activity. It is not a program for laziness. Before anything else, God's mission demands our effort and our sweat.

And you say, why should I bother? Listen, every one of us here sweats buckets doing other things in life, things we enjoy. So, why not the mission of God, which is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the nations?

Is this not one of the complaints God made to the post-captivity people of Israel in the prophetic books of Malachi and Haggai? The Israelites are busy, busy, busy, establishing their own wealth, building their own houses.

But they were lazy when it came to working for the benefit of God's mission and his honor among them. You know, if we devoted, I'm thinking here perhaps, not wishing to put anyone on the spot, but given our lack of Sunday school teachers, for example, our lack of people to work with the kids in this conlegation, you see how many kids we've got, right?

We don't have enough people to work for them. If we devoted as much effort to the kingdom of God as we do to indulge in our own pleasures, pretty sure we would never have any problem finding volunteers to help.

- [13 : 28] In the second instance, this mission was to a people important to God. Important to God. Whenever God uses the word Nineveh in this chapter, he always follows it with the words, that great city.

Nineveh, that great city. Now, there are different ways to understand this word great. It could refer to its size, it could refer to its status, but most commentators suggest it relates rather to its importance to God.

It's important to God, the city of Nineveh, this place which is great in my eyes because its inhabitants are precious to me. It would be very interesting to talk of the strategic importance of cities in the mission of God.

They were important in Paul's missionary journeys, but that's not the point here. Rather, it's the preciousness of each of the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh to God.

The last verse of the book 411, containing God's passion for the people of Nineveh. Should I not pity them? Remember that I'm clean Gentiles.

- [14 : 37] They're Assyrians, they're enemies to the Jews, but God loves his enemies. They're precious to him. One of the things I do as you minister from time to time is I take a walk.

I take a walk to different places in the city, but the two places I go to most often are the reservoir up the back of Mogai and the top of Cathcan Braise in the southeast of the city.

And both of these places have a superb view of the whole of the city of Glasgow and beyond. Much of the Clyde Valley. Well over a million, million people.

every one of the people in our city, every single one has a soul precious to God. Is that not one reason we want to engage in gospel mission, plant churches all over our city and region?

These are our people, but more importantly, they're precious to God. This is a great city, Glasgow. not just because of its size and not just because of its status, but because it's important to God.

- [15 : 52] Each of its inhabitants is precious to him. And then in the third instance, the mission of God was to speak.

It was to speak. God commanded Jonah saying, call out against it the message that I tell you. Call out against it. The mission of God was vocal. It consisted in word and sentences.

It's communication at its best. But this, you know, rather than, what I want you to draw your attention to is this. Speak the message that I tell you, God says to Jonah.

Speak the message that I tell you. Faithfulness in mission consists in telling God's truth, telling nothing but God's truth, and telling the whole of God's truth. The aim of mission is not novelty, but originality.

Speak the truth of God. Jonah, you don't have to go find looking for words to express what God wants to communicate. You just listen to God. He'll tell you what to say.

- [16 : 56] This is the pattern of all the Old Testament prophets. Don't stray beyond what God has told you to say. Whether you're Isaiah or Micah, whether you're Hosea or Malachi, the role of the prophet is not to innovate.

It is to listen carefully to the voice of God. I'm not sure that the situation would in bear as full equivalence to that of the Old Testament prophet.

After all, God speaks through his word to us, but as he spoke to them directly. God surely this remains important. Our role as New Testament prophets of the gospel is not to stray beyond the boundaries of the word of God, the centrality of Christ and his gospel in all of scripture.

So, replace the man Jonah with the nation of Israel, the Israel through which God had designed to pour down his grace upon the world.

By Jonah's time, Israel had become inward and lazy. They had thought only they were precious to God and no other nation on earth. The message they were sending to the nations wasn't one that God had given them to say.

[18 : 13] It was one of exclusion and hatred, not invite and love. What about us? Surely we who live in the shadow of the cross shall not be lazy, loveless, and unwelcoming.

Surely not. Third, verse 3, the man of God, the man of God. So, Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord.

Don't you think it would have been easier all the way round if Jonah 3 had actually been Jonah 1? verse 3? It would all have been a lot more straightforward. Instead of disobeying God and falling foul of a large fish, it would all have been easier if Jonah had just obeyed God in the first place.

Well, you know, never was Jonah more of a man than when he swallowed his pride and did what he should have done from the beginning. Never was he more of a man. Just get on with doing what God tells you to do, Jonah.

He's gone from zero to hero, and all because rather than dig his heels in, he sets his heels in the direction of Nineveh and starts walking.

[19 : 29] You are never more the man or woman that God has made you to be than when you're walking in obedience to the commands of Christ. Matthias's father, Kurt van der Schwe, who was here last Sunday and will be with us more often in days to come, once wrote to me in an email, that the pursuit of holiness in our lives represents the recovery of true humanity.

The pursuit of holiness in our lives represents the recovery of true humanity. You are never more human than when you give up your own personal autonomy and hand it over to God as your offering of praise for what Jesus has done for you on the cross.

holiness. Finally, finally, Jonah's got the point. Now, theologically, of course, I think there's more going on here than it first appears.

The Israel to whom God had commanded to be a light to the nations had so far failed. It would soon be attacked and invaded by the Assyrians. It too would experience a form of living Sheol, as Jonah talks about in Jonah 2.

But when the people of God rise from the ashes, will they finally obey God? When God gives them that second chance, will they become the light to the nations God has designed them to be?

[20 : 51] Or will they circle the wagons again and become hate filled and xenophobic? You see, this is important for our day.

The greatness of Israel, in God's eyes, never consisted in financial wealth, political influence, and territorial conquest.

It consisted in opening its arms to a needy world and proclaiming to them the steadfast love of God. You are never more a man or woman of God than when you're living in obedience to his word and you're extending the arms of the gospel to a lost and needy world.

world. We are never more the church that God has purposed us to be than when we exist for the propagation of the gospel and the discipleship of all the nations of the earth.

In other words, for all our political influence, our financial wealth, and our numerical size, if we are not focused outward on mission, then we're not a church worthy of the name.

[22 : 07] We're a rotting relic of what we once were. We're dead men walking. Take a leaf out of Jonah's book. It's time to man up.

Take our responsibility seriously. The mercy of God, the mission of God, the man of God, and then lastly, the message of God in verse four, the message of God.

Now, Nineveh was a big city, as we're told in the text, an exceedingly great city. Offline, we can talk about how big Nineveh was, but for the ancient world, it was massive.

What exactly is meant by three days' journey in breadth is open to debate, but the point is it was a seriously big city. Let's not minimize the sheer bigness of Nineveh.

In fact, if at all possible, let's big Nineveh up, shall we? For citizens of the ancient world, most of whom were rural farmers, a city of this size was unimaginable.

[23 : 13] There were palaces, and there were temples, and there were great houses, and there were sports arenas, there were bustling marketplaces, there were crowded streets. Cities like Nineveh were hubs of financial and cultural and technological power.

More money passed daily through the hands of Nineveh traders than existed in the whole of Israel. When a new fashion, a new idea, a new art form, a new dance, a new song swept the theaters and marketplaces of Nineveh, it wasn't long before the whole empire was dancing to its tune.

It was the center of technological innovation. It was the military machine through which the Assyrian Empire was driven, armed, and given its technological edge over all the nations.

This city represented the best that man could offer, the pinnacle of human achievement, the pride of all the earth. Think of the great cities of our day, the city of London, with all its financial muscle, the city of New York, with all its cultural influence, the city of Tokyo, with all its technological advantage.

Think of the triumph of cities, the best this world can offer. Think of Glasgow. You can dine in the morning in one of our five star hotels and have breakfast.

[24 : 47] And then all day you can work in one of our world leading industries. Then at night, you can take in a world class concert in our city halls.

This is the best our nation has to offer. And God's message, that which Jonah is to tell this greatest of ancient cities is this.

In 40 days, the city will be gone. In 40 days, the city will be gone. The succeeding great city will lie ruins, its population scattered, its life extinguished.

Visualize the divine destruction of Nineveh. God has track record. He did it with Sodom and with Gomorrah and with Babel.

This is the message of Jonah, the overthrow of the best this world of man can offer. The destruction of the pinnacle of human achievement, the humbling of the pride of all the earth.

[26 : 03] You know the tragedy? is that our fellow Glaswegians do not know that our great city will also be overthrown by God.

It might not be 40 days, it might be 4,000 years, but all the great cities of our world shall be razed to the ground. There is a day of reckoning on the horizon, a day of divine visitation and judgment when Jesus Christ shall overthrow them in fire and make all our nightmares seem like fairy tales.

The people of Glasgow don't know it, but we know it, we know it, that for all the power and the muscles and the pride of our cities, we're all destined for ruin.

We know it full well. What kind of citizen of Glasgow are you? If you should keep that knowledge to yourself. people say we live in a day of small things, maybe we do.

So did Jonah, maybe, just maybe, the day of big things will happen when we as the Christian church regain our vision for the glory of the gospel in Scotland.

[27 : 28] God has given us many chances Jesus to do so. And he's giving us yet another one, both as a church and as individual Christians.

What will you do tonight with God's merciful challenge? Let us pray. Lord, these are ominous words, and yet we know they were offered with love, with compassion and with pity.

They're words that Jonah did not want to hear because he was interested only in the destruction of Nineveh, not in its salvation. you. Father, forgive us for being quiet when we know that all the great cities of the world and all the great nations of the world which today are so prominent will one day be gone, replaced perhaps by something else or someone else.

And we said nothing. We kept silent. Lord, we pray that you'd give us that attitude of the founder of the Salvation Army, General Booth, when he's standing over the pit of hell and he sees so many there that he could have told about it and warned against it.

Father, we pray tonight that as we've heard your word and especially as we've heard this challenge go out to us again, God called to Jonah the second time.

[29 : 05] We pray that for all of us here who have messed up time and again, you'd give us the freshness of this call on our ears tonight that you are calling to us again and giving us another chance.

We thank you for the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no other foundation upon which we can lay our faith. In whose name we pray. Amen.