

Grace Produces Repentance

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[0 : 00] Good morning, so we'll be reading the whole of chapter 3. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying,!

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 through Nineveh, by the 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.

[1 : 19] 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.

Well, good morning, everyone. It's good to be back, and there's some familiar faces too, especially Gray, as you're right in front of me, so it's great to see you again.

Why don't we pray as we come to God's word? Father, my words don't have power to even get to my own heart, let alone anyone else's, but your word does.

And so I pray that you would pierce each of our hearts this morning. I pray that you, as we just sang, that we would rejoice in the fact that we bring nothing to you in our hands.

Simply to your cross we cling. So I pray that you would speak to us in your word. Give us listening ears and hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, we've had Easter as kind of broken up, Jonah, so I'm just going to start with a bit of a recap, and hopefully that helps you if you're joining us this morning.

[2 : 50] Like a movie or book, so we're in Jonah, by the way. I suppose we've had the Bible reading, you should know that. Like a movie or book recounting a true story, there's four scenes, four backdrops for what happens in Jonah.

So chapter one, you're on the boat in the storm. Chapter two, you're inside the fish. Chapter three today, we're in the city of Nineveh. And chapter four next week, we're on a hill under a vine.

So scene one on the boat, Jonah is called by the Lord to go to Nineveh. He disobeys. He goes in the complete opposite direction. Why?

It would be like a Ukrainian walking into Moscow and crying out the evils against it. It would be like a migrant or a Jewish person going to a neo-Nazi rally where police aren't present and crying out against it.

Like to be imprisoned or punched would be the least of your worries. But I think it's more than fear of personal safety that Jonah doesn't go.

[4 : 06] And chapter four, we'll see next week, really develops this. But Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's greatest threat. Jonah would rather see his country prosper.

He does not want to see these evil pagans get a chance to repent. Now, the irony in scene one is that despite Jonah running in the opposite direction, God's mission to the nations is unstoppable.

What do we find at the end of that scene? Pagans are in awe of the true God. They see the Lord's anger turned away by Jonah sacrificing himself as a substitute for them.

And they commit, they make vows to the living God. The very opposite of what Jonah wanted happened. Not because of him, despite of him.

Then we go to scene two in the fish. The Lord doesn't give Jonah what he wants or deserves. He wants to be away from the presence of God.

[5 : 20] He should have let him go to the bottom of the ocean in the darkness and no life. But he doesn't. He shows incredible mercy. Miraculously saving him physically in the fish and how he survived in the fish, it is a mystery.

But spiritually, he has gripped afresh that his life is entirely because of the undeserved, steadfast love of the Lord. He's gripped my mercy in the fish.

Now, if you went to Grace Kids or Sunday School, whatever your church called it, if you went to church growing up, most of us know scenes one and two.

And we kind of could be tempted to think the story stops. If we stop there, well, we're not stopping there. We want to preach through all the word of God. If we stop there, we miss some big lessons in the book of Jonah.

As we come to scene three in the city of Nineveh, the story focuses on the theme of repentance. What is repentance?

[6 : 31] It's a radical change of heart and mind. It's a turning completely the opposite direction, a turning from what is wrong back to God.

Here's what we're going to see in chapter three. God's grace produces repentance. That order is really important.

His grace produces repentance. We're going to see it's God's word has power to cut to the heart. You can't explain it.

There is a power here that you can't explain. And the third thing we're going to see is God responds to repentance. He sees it and he loves to show radical mercy.

So let's get into scene three. Verses one and two. If we consider the Lord high above in the heavens, it is incredible that he would speak to anyone a second time.

[7 : 48] But the Lord loves to give new beginnings. He loves fresh starts. He should have just let Jonah sink to the bottom.

Like start with someone a bit more obedient. Like just some, skerrick of obedience. But he doesn't. He gives a fresh start. He comes a second time.

Jonah finally obeys. What produced that obedience? He goes according to the word of the Lord. What produced it? Because he was gripped afresh by his own mercy.

His own recipient of mercy. If in this past week you've failed with your kids. You've failed to be a light in your workplace.

Go again. God is a God of fresh starts. We would all be rendered useless in serving God if God wasn't a God of fresh starts.

[8 : 51] And the point of fresh starts is renewed obedience. Go. Go say whatever I tell you. He doesn't even know the message yet. He has an idea of what it's going to be.

Jonah has tasted the Lord's mercy firsthand. A keenness. A keen awareness rather. Of your own mercy.

It humbles you. And you're full of thanksgiving like we see at the end of chapter 2. That is the best place to be. To be used by the Lord. In giving mercy to others.

So God is a God of fresh starts. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. But notice his commitment to Nineveh. If his ultimate desire was to see Nineveh perish.

He doesn't need to send his word. All he needs to send is fire. There's nothing in them that deserve him sending his word.

[9 : 55] But he's committed. Go to Nineveh. He's committed to Nineveh. The only thing he owes Nineveh is judgment.

But he's committed to Nineveh. I can't explain why. Now the message Jonah speaks, it's heavy, is it not? Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

That sounds like God is against you. And he is. He is a God of justice. But as much as it sounds like he's against Nineveh, he's sending his word for Nineveh.

He's very much for their salvation. That's why he's sending his word. If you are affronted by God's word, it feels like it's against you sometimes.

It is never against you. It's always for you. As much as you don't want to hear it in that moment, he's always for you. Now what did the Lord see in Nineveh that prompted him to give this opportunity to repent?

[11 : 05] Did he see some sign of remorse? I doubt it. Did he see some positive change?

They started to be just a little bit more kind. I doubt it. He's not sending his word to those who repent.

His word creates repentance. It's his gracious commitment that creates repentance. That is such good news.

It's God's grace that produces, creates repentance.

Then verses three to nine. It's God's word that has divine power to cut to the heart. That's impossible to explain. The Lord calls Jonah to a task he can't accomplish.

[12:12] This is an impossible task. The emphasis here is Nineveh is a great city. We're told it's exceedingly great. It's three days journey.

I suppose that's the size. But I do wonder, based off chapter two, Sam took us through that, how three days in Jewish thinking was to confirm death. I just wonder if there's a play on numbers here of go and die.

Go to this massive city of 120,000 people by yourself. Good luck with that. Go to the capital, the most powerful nation, as a foreigner.

You've got no credentials. They have not invited you. Go to a pagan people who worship other gods, who are forcing Israel to pay taxes and say, you are subject to the Lord of Israel.

Good luck with that. Go to one of the cruelest, violent empires of ancient times. Assyrian kings, just, I've got to say, I'm sorry if I'm conscious of little ones in the room, but they cut off the limbs of their enemies except for one arm so that they could shake the hand of their enemies as they died.

[13:44] That's just a taste, I won't say any more, because it's more to say, that's a taste of their cruelty. Go to this violent state and tell them they're the ones in danger of perishing by the judge of all the earth.

It's an impossible task. Now, just as an aside, quickly, I don't think anyone should be offended by an angry God who threatens punishment.

It's a God of love who is angry at injustice and evil. God would not be worth worshipping if he didn't care about all the violence and the injustice in this world.

I don't think we should stumble over that. The Lord calls Jonah to a task he cannot accomplish.

A people who don't deserve this warning, it's almost certainly going to result in his death. If we think the fish swallowing Jonah is the most miraculous event in the book, I think it is.

[15:07] Verses 5 to 9. This is mysterious how it happens. The people of Nineveh believed God.

The only thing I can imagine blokes in the pub and members of parliament agreeing on is getting more money or something that will prosper their own well-being.

But here, we're told, from all across the strata of society, the king, down to all the people, they're cut to the heart. They're weeping over their wrongdoing.

They didn't hear Jonah as some strange foreigner. They heard his words as from God. The word of God has power to cut to the heart.

Now, to what depth this repentance is, there's debate among that. It's not completely clear because, like the sailors in scene one, they call on the name of Yahweh.

[16:16] We've only got the general name of God here, not the covenant name, and they're not making vows to him. But they are grieving over their wrongdoing. They are committing to turning from their wrongdoing.

There are the marks of true repentance here. The king is off his throne. He knows he is answerable to the most high God. There's conviction.

They're grieving over their sin. They're wearing sackcloth. That's what you'd wear to a funeral when you're grieving. They're grieving over their wrongdoing. They saw that they deserved punishment.

They took the threat seriously. They didn't say, God, that's not fair. They didn't shift the blame.

They're saying, that's repentance. We deserve it. We deserve this.

And they confess their spiritual helplessness. They're fasting. They're not trying to quickly clean up their act or something. They're not saying, whoa, whoa, whoa, God, here's what's on the other side of the ledger.

[17:20] They're just going, God, maybe he'll have mercy. They're just powerless. That's repentance. No human reasoning or psychological analysis can go deep enough to explain what's going on here.

It's this mass revival of the word of God piercing their hearts. It's the power of God's word to do that.

You can't change anyone. But a simple, even brief word of truth that you know is from God's word, it has power.

You don't have to raise your tone to make it more powerful. You don't have to yell it to give it more power. The word of God has power.

I know you've experienced that. I think this should encourage us to renew prayer for people we've given up on as well.

[18 : 40] No one's too far gone. I think the other thing we see here is repentance is what God is pleased with.

Repentance is at the heart of the Christian life. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses in Wittenberg, the first one said, when our Lord Jesus Christ said repent, he meant that the whole of the Christian life should be repentance.

Not a one-off that you did 10 years ago. The whole of the Christian life should be repentance. Now just to give you an example of that, this is one that's hit me at the moment in my stage of life.

I was reading an article, what makes a dad a Christian dad? And the guy said, if I'm going to be a Christian dad, I have to be a repenting dad.

Walk back into a room where I was too sharp, too heavy, too quick to assume, too slow to listen, too eager to make a point and say I was wrong.

[20 : 01] To say to your child, will you forgive me? I don't think that weakens my fatherhood. I think it saves it from becoming a performance because my children don't need the myth of a father who is always right.

They need to know what a man does when he is wrong. They need to know whether grace lives here in this house or only gets talked about here. I was really struck by that.

A broken heart, oh God, you will not despise. God's word has a power to cut to the heart.

And repentance is what God is pleased with. And God responds, verse 10, God responds to repentance with radical mercy.

Let me reverse that. 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.

[21 : 22] And he did not do it. See the character of God here. He responds. He sees.

And he responds to any sincere turning to him. Some of my turning is very half-hearted. But I take not only Nineveh but other parts of the Bible.

I take courage that just turn. He sees. He responds. Now, Jonah doesn't stumble over God's just punishment on wrongdoing.

We today might stumble a bit on a God of wrath. He's stumbling on how God could show mercy to Nineveh. Now, if we, like Jonah's contemporaries, knew Nineveh, I think we're meant to be shocked he did not do it.

How could God relent on them? It's meant to be radical.

[22 : 38] In 2006, in Pennsylvania in the US, a gunman entered a small Amish school. You may have remembered this. He took ten girls aged six to 13 hostage and he shot them all.

Killed five and injured the rest. And he turned the gun on himself. That evil is shocking. But the Amish families and community was more radical than the gunman.

They expressed public forgiveness for him. They attended his funeral and expressed grief for the family that he left behind.

That kind of mercy is more radical than the evil. It's shocking.

It's moving, is it not? That's what Jonah is tripping over here. It's at the heart of the book of Jonah, I think. Just to, chapter 4, verse 1.

[24 : 01] It displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. Jonah wants a God who judges the evil people and blesses the good.

He loves mercy for himself because he's more deserving of it. Not them. I think we get hints of his superiority.

Back in chapter 1, he talks about who he is and he answers, I'm a Hebrew. He talks about his ethnicity before he talks about his faith in the Lord.

Now, I'm not sure how much to read into that, but it could be a little hint. I'm a Hebrew. And then in chapter 2, those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

I'm not like them who worship idols. Just these little, and then here in this chapter, the only message we're told he preached was the one of wrath.

[25 : 09] Is that all he said? Is he delighting in a message of wrath? There's a sense of superiority in Jonah.

I love mercy for myself. But I can't see that they deserve it. Jonah is superior.

And that's exactly the context when Jesus quotes this passage in Matthew 12. The Pharisees are shocked that Jesus can be so merciful to sinners.

And Jesus says in Matthew 12, In other words, why aren't you repenting?

All that was stopping them was a sense of superiority. Like Jonah, the Pharisees wanted God to bless the good and punish the evil.

[26 : 24] They didn't appreciate that them themselves needed shocking mercy. If at any point you and I believe someone is less worthy of receiving mercy than us, we are dangerously not understanding the depth of God's mercy to us.

Dangerously not understanding. J.I. Packer, in his classic book, Knowing God, says that a person needs three things to understand, deeply understand God's mercy, to be gripped by it.

And these things make someone a Christian or not. If this has hit you, if this has grabbed you, one thing you need is a sense of your moral debt before God.

And Nineveh had that. They deserve God's fierce anger. You need a sense of your problem before God. The second thing you need is a sense of your spiritual powerlessness.

A lot of religion is just doing something, something to curry God's favour. Now, if you want to understand mercy, you need to understand, you need to sit in the ashes.

[27 : 48] You need to wear sackcloth. You're powerless to deserve it. You can't cry hard enough. You can't set stronger resolves.

We're powerless. We just sang it in that song. Not the labours of my hands can fulfil your law's demands. Could my zeal, no respite, no.

Could my tears forever flow? All for sin could not attain. You must save and you alone. You need to understand your moral debt. You need to understand your powerlessness.

But you need a third thing. And this Nineveh could not have understood like we can today. You need to know how costly it is for God to give you mercy. It's not cheap.

The only way God could look over Nineveh's wrong, the only way he can look over your wrong, is that that fierce anger has been poured out on his eternal son.

[28 : 52] God took his anger on himself. Well, in Nineveh, God didn't look for any worth in them to send his word.

It wasn't anything in them that... It was the power of his word that created the sadness, that created the crying out for mercy.

And we see that he loves to show radical mercy to those who repent. There was nothing in Nineveh that deserved any of this.

The Lord doesn't see anything in me or you that prompted him to send his only son.

I need shocking mercy. He isn't waiting for you to show signs of repentance before offering forgiveness and a fresh start.

[30 : 06] He said, come into the presence of my word. Come look at the cross. Come into the community of the word. And be blown away that his son did that for you.

Before you were even asking. Before there was even any movement towards him. He did that for you. He wants you that much. It cost him that much.

That will bring you to tears. That... Or by the Spirit. Look at the cross and let the Spirit help you grieve over your sin.

Let's not wait for that angry neighbour next door to show signs of change before we move towards them. Or that person at work who no one can tolerate.

Let's not wait for them to be kinder to move towards them. Don't wait for change in your spouse.

Don't wait for that family member who's really done damage to your family.

[31 : 27] Don't wait for any signs of remorse. I think this passage moved towards them in grace.

Let's not wait for signs of change before moving towards them.

The Lord didn't look for signs in Nineveh before he moved towards them. He didn't look for signs in you and me before he moved towards us. I'm not saying let's move as morally superior.

I'm going to be more merciful than you. Don't go. You can do this in a wrong way. We're meant to be gripped by how shocking God's mercy is to us. And drawing on that move towards them.

There is no them. I am the them. He's had mercy that we might be ambassadors of mercy. Will you pray with me?

Let's pray. Father, I pray that forgive us for...

[32 : 44] creating these classifications in our mind and heart of... who is good and who is not.

And placing ourselves in the good camp. Forgive us for that. I pray that at the foot of your cross, you would pierce each of our hearts afresh. Both at what we deserve, seen at the cross, but also at the shocking mercy of shyness.

Lord, you know where your word needs to hit each one of us. So I pray that you would do that work. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.