

God's Grace and Nineveh's Repentance

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[0:00] Amen. Amen.

So we've had a real journey with Jonah so far, haven't we? We've seen the word of the Lord come to him. We've seen his reaction. Nope, not doing that.

We've seen him run away from God. We've seen him in danger in the storm that God sent to him because of his disobedience. We've seen him thrown into the sea, and now we've seen him hanging out for days in the belly of the fish.

We looked at that last week. So where are we? We're pretty much right back where we started. As we will see, God is persistent.

When we're being disobedient to him, that fact is often irritating to us. It probably was to Jonah. And it can even be terrifying. But as we'll see also, the persistence and the steadfastness of God is a wonderful thing.

[1:37] It's closely linked to his grace and mercy. It's closely linked to his faithfulness. He doesn't give up on Jonah or on the mission that he has for him. I trust that many of you have found that God doesn't give up on you.

I've found that. Thank God he doesn't. So, what is it that God calls Jonah to do this time, and what happens? What is God up to here?

What is Jonah up to here? What does all of this mean for us, and how does it point us to Christ?

Well, let's dig into our text and find out.

If you have your Bibles with you, we're in Jonah chapter 3. I think my phone is going off.

I apologize. I apologize. Pardon me for a moment. I've judged others too harshly on that front.

[2:45] Get into what's coming to me. So, Jonah chapter 3, verses 1 through 2. 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.

Now, does that sound familiar to you? It should. With just some small differences, we're seeing what we saw in chapter 1, aren't we? Jonah isn't off the hook.

The fish puke incident didn't change God's determination to get that message to Nineveh, did it?

Now, as readers, if we didn't already know what happens next, but we do because we just read it, we'd be wondering, okay, what's going to happen now?

Will Jonah obey the word of the Lord this time? Or is something else that is comically awful going to happen to him? But we see Jonah's response in verse 3, don't we? So Jonah arose, not to flee, Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.

Now, Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breath. So, Jonah didn't run this time. He arose and he went to Nineveh as he had been instructed.

[4:07] It's amazing what three days in the belly of a fish can do for you. Now, there is some debate about what is meant by this reference to three days' journey with Nineveh.

Jonah. Is the city so big that it takes three days to get from one side to the other? Or is it talking not just about the city but the surrounding area? Or is it saying that it will take Jonah three days to get there?

Well, whatever the answer, one thing is clear. Jonah's task is a lot of work and he's actually going to do it this time.

So what does Jonah do? We see that in verse 4. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

So, pretty simple message, isn't it? Nineveh is under God's judgment. They have forty days. Now, we don't know that Jonah said anything else.

[5:12] We don't have any indication that there was much of a time span between Jonah announcing God's judgment and what follows immediately. The plainest reading would suggest, I think, that the results were pretty much immediate and drastic.

So we see in verse 5, The people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and they put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them.

Well, that was dramatic, wasn't it? The people heard, the people believed, and the people repented. Now, if only it were always like that. It's as if Jonah had said to them, You need to repent. And the whole city just said, Yeah, you're right. Let's do that. God's power, through His word, made a total and immediate impact. God's word has a way of doing that.

Now, it wasn't just the common people of the city who were impacted. We see in verse 6, The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from the throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

[6:24] Now, there's an image for you. This is a sign of how completely effective this call to repentance actually was. The king himself took notice.

He got off his throne, he removed his royal robe, he humbled himself, he dressed himself for repentance, sitting in ashes, and he truly repented. The king humbled himself after hearing the word of the Lord.

And notice he takes everyone, he commands everyone, to follow his lead. We see in verses 7 and 8, He issued a proclamation and published throughout 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. That's a striking thing. The king and his subjects, who if you remember, didn't have the blessings of God's covenant people Israel, they repented in a way that would have put Israel and their prophet Jonah to shame.

[7:46] And the decree is that everyone will repent and everyone will fast, even the animals. Everyone will call out to God and turn from their evil ways. So even the animals they rent on it, I can't imagine what that must have been like.

When my dog is hungry, she causes me to trip over her every time I go near the pantry. I can't imagine how much the animals must have driven the people nuts, to be quite honest.

They're already hungry and grouchy, and they have animals that haven't eaten either. And clearly, PETA was not yet around to be outraged by this whole thing. The king, after issuing that decree, gives his reasoning.

We see that in verse 9. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

Now there are a couple of really important points in that short statement from the king, I think. First, the king expects that this God, the God of Israel, the God who created all things, might be merciful to them.

[9:03] But the other thing that jumps out is that at the same time, the king realizes that God is under no obligation to be merciful. He's not a genie, granting wishes.

He can't be manipulated. They can't force God's hand by the sackcloth and ashes. God will have to choose to be merciful. And the king realizes this.

The wonderful thing is that the Lord does choose to be merciful. We see that in verse 10. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he said he would do to them.

And he did not do it. Now, God is merciful to them. As we would expect because we know what God is like.

But that was an uncertain thing for the people of Nineveh. They didn't know what to expect. But God showed mercy as God does. God pardoned those who repented as God does.

[10:05] God's character is solidly on display here. And now, we see in hindsight what God had in mind when his word came to Jonah.

Jonah. This is what we've been building up to. This is the climax of the story. God's merciful care for the people of Nineveh.

So I think we'd have to say that what God is up to in this chapter gets more attention than what Jonah is up to. And the people of Nineveh get more attention than Jonah too. But we can still see what's going on with Jonah here.

He's obedient this time. The word coming to him the second time had vastly different results than the word coming to him the first time.

Jonah learned the importance of obedience the hard way, didn't he? That has a way of happening. I've learned the importance of obedience the hard way myself.

[11:07] How about you? Yeah. But, I think that Jonah's ordeal actually shaped him for the ministry that God would entrust to him.

That said, when we think about what Jonah is doing in this chapter, we have to mention also how little Jonah really does. So he does answer the call and he does go on his journey.

But then he preaches a very simple message. We see no sign that Jonah's message was complicated or sophisticated or eloquent. No. Jonah says, simply, yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

And that does it. The success of this mission isn't found in Jonah's ability. He simply announced the word of the Lord.

And the results were awe-inspiring. That's because God is up to quite a lot in this chapter. Let's think about what God is doing.

[12:18] First, we see his... Oh my goodness. Sorry. I'm just going to turn this phone off. Anyone who needs to talk to me is here anyway, I think.

So let's think about what God is doing. First, let's think about his unwillingness to let Jonah go. He didn't stop when Jonah disobeyed him. He didn't let Jonah die in the storm.

His grace to Jonah is absolutely and utterly persistent. God's grace is like that. And he didn't let Jonah's mission go either. Maybe Jonah thought after his whole ordeal that he could just forget about the word of the Lord.

Forget about God's calling for him. Forget about the cost of obedience. If he thought so, he would have been sorely disappointed. No.

God had a mission for Jonah to accomplish and it was going to happen no matter what. Jonah. Because as we see, God's intention is to use Jonah to bring the people of Nineveh to repentance.

[13:35] And that immediate and complete repentance on the part of the people of Nineveh was so obviously the doing of God. It was his power. He didn't need to give Jonah a lot of words.

He wasn't relying on Jonah's charm. After being in the belly of a fish for three days and getting barked up on shore, Jonah probably wasn't very charming. It was the power of God working through Jonah's simple proclamation.

They did it all. Now, I've read some who actually argue that the account of Nineveh's repentance couldn't have really happened because it seemed so extraordinary.

They say, what? The whole city repented? Really? But I think that we can only come to that conclusion that it's impossible if we deny the power of our God.

That's the only way. God can and does change hearts through the proclamation of His Word and He can change the hearts of cities and nations.

[14:43] Don't you believe that? So God brought them to repentance. The might of the Lord brought the whole city to repentance. For what purpose?

Because as we were reminded in our psalm this morning, the Lord is slow to anger and abounding in love. The Lord wanted to spare Nineveh as He always spares those who repent.

And so He did. He accepted their repentance and He showed mercy to them. That is the kind of God that the people of Nineveh encountered.

And that is the kind of God we serve. Isn't He amazing? So what does all of this mean for us? Well, there are a few things I want us to take away from this morning's passage.

First, let's think back again about God's persistence with Jonah. The Word of the Lord came to Jonah more than one time. God is persistent.

[15:44] His grace to us is persistent. I've seen that in my own life. Now, as I was growing up, I was in church three times a week.

Three times a week, I heard the Word of the Lord. I heard it, and it sailed right over my head. I did not repent and believe the gospel until I was well into my teen years.

And as a teenager up to that point, I had pretty little interest in the Christian faith that I had grown up around. So, I started exploring the possibility of other religions, or maybe the possibility of having no religion whatsoever, even though, sure enough, through the Word preached and through the witness of my family, the Word had come to me again and again.

But God did not stop preaching for me. Now, it was basically an act of curiosity, at least I thought of it that way, I decided to try and sit down to read the New Testament with fresh eyes the summer

before my junior year of high school.

So, I'm 16 years old, I'm sitting on my bed, I'm reading the New Testament, the King James Version, of course, because we were old school Baptists. This is happening, and the Word of the Lord came to me again, and I believed.

[17:08] I believed that this Jesus is who he said he is, and that changed my life. Think about the Lord's grace to us.

When I was non-believer, the Word of the Lord still kept coming to me. Did the Word of the Lord come to you again and again before you believed? Or, if you've ever found yourself turning from the Lord as Jonah did, didn't you find that the Word of the Lord came to you again and again, calling you to repentance, and wouldn't leave you alone?

Or, maybe you're even there this morning. Maybe the Word of the Lord is coming to you this morning, calling you to faith in Christ, or calling you to repent of your disobedience to Him.

If it is, heed that call. I think that this morning's passage also has a lot to teach us about the power of God and His Word in evangelism.

I want us to focus our attention on the power found in the Word of God. Jonah preached the Word of the Lord to Nineveh, and look what happened.

[18:18] God works through the Word proclaimed. The Word proclaimed by Jonah wasn't flashy, wasn't particularly sophisticated, wasn't a stunning piece of oratory.

No! Jonah simply proclaimed the Word of the Lord and the whole city was brought to repentance. I think about my duty as a preacher when I think about Jonah's preaching and I realize that it's actually very simple.

I explain and proclaim God's Word. That's all. I do that knowing what God promises, that He will work in your hearts and in mine through His Word.

I recently ran across a quote from the reformer Martin Luther who was talking about what was accomplished in his ministry during the reformation. Here's what Luther said.

I simply taught, preached and wrote God's Word. Otherwise I did nothing. The Word did it all. The Word did it all. We should think about that when we think about our mission as a congregation, when we think about our commitment to personal evangelism.

[19:30] The Word did it all. We don't have to be flashy. And we have what we need right here. Although for personal evangelism, I wouldn't recommend one this heavy.

Now some of you are familiar with the work of the Pocket Testament League. Are you? Anyone who's not? All right. I've been in touch with them lately to ask them if they could give our congregation some training on evangelism, specifically evangelism that focuses on the power of the Spirit working through the Scriptures.

I'm excited about that. That is in the works. But really we can start now. How? Knowing the Scriptures. Knowing how to explain the Gospel simply.

And if you say, well I don't know how to explain the Gospel simply. Talk to someone who does. Or come to our adult Sunday school class. And you'll learn there.

Yes. Now here's a little exercise for us this morning. Think of someone you know who needs Jesus.

[20:49] You thinking? Now, start thinking and praying about and determining to commit yourself to how you're going to share the Word of the Lord with that person.

You have homework. And here's the thing. You don't have to worry. You don't have to be flashy. It doesn't have to be fancy. And you also don't have to worry that you have to make the Gospel palatable.

Our Nigerian Archbishop, Archbishop Oko, recently said, when we concentrate on delivering the Gospel of Jesus Christ, people will be cut to the heart and repent.

What we see in Jonah chapter 3 is that God works through His Word to accomplish His mission. All that we are asked to do is proclaim what He's given us.

And the Lord can and will work mightily through that. Because at the end of the day, it is not about us. It's about the saving power of God.

[21:58] And the repentance of Nineveh shows us this morning that the saving power of God has no limits. So be bold. Never be discouraged.

In a sermon a few weeks ago, I quoted Asguinus, who reminds us that no matter how bad things seem, the Holy Spirit can turn things around in five minutes. In five minutes, God can turn lives around.

He can turn cities around. He can turn nations around. And that's what we see happening in Nineveh, isn't it? So we simply need to speak the Lord's Word plainly, clearly, boldly. And pray that God will do what He did then in our world now, today. So we've talked about God's persistent grace. We've talked about the power of God, the power of God's Word, the power of the Spirit.

I want us to take those things to heart this morning. I also want us to take to heart the incredible compassion and mercy of our God, how that's found in our text, and how that points us to our Lord Jesus.

[23:09] Last week, we talked about how Jesus drew a parallel between Himself and Jonah in Matthew chapter 12. Now, I'm assuming that you probably didn't memorize it when we went over it last week, so I will read it again.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. But He answered them, an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet 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. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

And behold, something greater than Jonah is here. I want us to focus on verse 41. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

And behold, something greater than Jonah is here. As we've seen already, Jonah is a type of Christ. He foreshadows Christ. And Jesus is the better Jonah because he's the perfect prophet.

[24:32] Now on the one hand, as we look at Jesus' words on the parallel between him and Jonah, there's a somber warning. neglecting to repent at the preaching of Jonah is bad enough.

But refusing to repent in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ is far worse because he is greater than Jonah. That said, we see God's mercy in the account in Jonah through the preaching of Jonah.

But we see God's mercy in an even greater way in Jesus Christ. Christ. Jonah came to Nineveh, told them that they were under judgment, and that's all he did. They decided that it would probably be a good idea at that point to repent and to hope that God would spare them, and he did.

We see God's mercy in a clear light in our Jonah account. But we see an even more amazing view of God's mercy in Jesus.

Jesus. It's true that Jesus, like Jonah, doesn't pull any punches. He reminds us that by nature we are under judgment, and he calls us to repentance. But he tells us things about our predicament and the solution that Jonah could never tell us.

[25:53] He is able to tell us to put all of our trust in him. He is able to tell us that he died for us, for the forgiveness of our sins. He is able to tell us that he rose again.

And that he is one eternal life for everyone who believes in him. He says something that Jonah could never say. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Jesus truly is the better Jonah, the better prophet. And his word is coming to us this morning. Now, maybe you have never received his word like the people of Nineveh.

Jonah. And you need to repent and believe the gospel for the first time. Or maybe you have received his word, but you're living in disobedience to him, as Jonah was. And you need to repent and return to him, as Jonah did.

Or maybe you just need the encouragement this morning to keep going. I suspect that all of us this morning are in one of those categories.

[26:57] And the better Jonah, our Lord Jesus Christ, calls each one of us to look to him for grace and mercy. If he was merciful to the people of Nineveh, we can be absolutely certain that he will be merciful to all who call on his name.

So he says to each one of us, as we were reminded in our gospel reading this morning, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden. And I will give you rest.

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.