

The God Who Saves Even the Wicked

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[0 : 00] Well, we come to the third in our series today in the prophecy of Jonah. Vijay Henderson has already shown in chapter one the sovereignty of God at work in achieving his will in the life of Jonah.

And then last Sunday in chapter two, we saw the God who saves. Jonah was rescued from the belly of the fish and brought back into renewed fellowship with Yahweh.

And given your Sunday school recollections, you are all probably certain that chapter two was the great miracle in the book.

Well, I want to contend that chapter three actually is the mind blowing wonder. And this is a chapter 10 verses short, but we could easily preach three sermons.

And Andrew's like, no, he he won't. Today we expand the scope as well of last week in considering the God who saves even the wicked.

[1 : 22] For most of our society these days, wicked is simply the name of a musical. And so in my outline, I said, how wicked is wicked.

And for some of you, that means exact opposite. And you probably said splendid spellbinding. I know I loved it. But wicked these days is a word reserved for fairy tales and horror stories.

People aren't wicked, are they? They're misguided. They're mistreated. They're misled maybe. They lack education.

They've been unfortunate. They're uncontrolled. Basically, the view is that we're all ultimately good.

Somehow. Now. And if there is evil, it's out there somewhere else far from here. But that is not what the Bible tells us.

[2 : 35] And nor, if we're really honest, is it our personal experience. I mean, for all of us, we've just had the horror of what happened on Melbourne streets this last Friday.

Pure evil, if you ask me. And in Nineveh. We have a contender for the most wicked nation there has ever been.

Certainly. It was one of the most brutal, ruthless and bloodthirsty empires that have ever existed. The Assyrian Empire, of which Nineveh was the capital, simply did not believe in the assimilation of its enemies.

Their approach was extermination. Their vanquished rivals were put to the sword.

Their cities were leveled to the ground. And they even went so far sometimes to destroy the trees so that nobody would return. If you were lucky and the Assyrians took you over, the best you got was slave labor in some faraway land.

[3 : 49] The British Museum is actually full of some really delightful accounts of the kings of Assyria recording their sheer brutality, their inhumanity.

They took delight. They had these massive freezes and other things just recording what they did to their enemies. If you ever have a chance, go and see them. So if anything epitomizes wickedness, it's the city of Nineveh.

And Jonah 1 has already told us that the wickedness of Nineveh has come to the attention of God. As all evil does. Don't be misled.

God pays attention to evil. So why do I claim that chapter 3 is the really noteworthy miracle then? Well, in it we witness what is, without doubt, the greatest mass conversion in the history of the world.

And furthermore, it's in the most unexpected place. The last place you'd expect repentance and revival. And we have the most unworthy characters involved.

[5 : 09] Except for one, of course. And that's not Jonah. Jonah. This is true revival. A revival that begins with a call of one man and a reluctant and disqualified man at that.

In my outline, which is in your bulletin, I indicate that there are three key protagonists in this account. So let's have a look at how the events unfold around them and what we learn, both about God and about ourselves.

Jonah 3 verse 1. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city. It took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city proclaiming 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

Given what we already know about Jonah, this first verse is full of stunning grace. Jonah is reinstated and he's given the same commission from God as he received in chapter 1.

[6 : 27] Our fugitive is given a second chance and this time he obeys. He's learnt his lesson. You see, God has no obligation to use this rebellious man.

Nor would we probably if we were in the place of God. But for Jonah's good and for ours, God remembers, as Psalm 145 verse 8 tells us, that we humankind are but dust.

And he gives us chance after chance. That's why we should not regard Jonah's repentance at the end of chapter 2 with skepticism.

As anything less than genuine. Just because we know what's going to happen in chapter 4 and we're going to see a Jonah with a really bad attitude. It doesn't mean that his repentance wasn't genuine.

God uses imperfect instruments. He used Abraham. And we think Abraham is one of the great heroes.

[7 : 38] But if you take a careful look, Abraham spent a long time in Iran, which was halfway on his journey to the promised land. Moses, that great hero of the Old Testament, was 40 years in Midian before he was any use to God.

And so it is for us too. We are no more reliable than them. How many times do you, and certainly I, have to repent?

It's again and again and again. But the prayer in chapter 2 is full of evidence that Jonah's is genuine repentance.

We see gratitude. We see gratitude. A broken will. There's profound praise for his God. And a desire.

He mentions the temple again and again. He wants to be in God's presence. And all of these things, they are not the hallmarks of counterfeit repentance. And because of this repentance, Jonah does exactly what God commands.

[8 : 46] He goes unhesitatingly to Nineveh. And while he probably really didn't want to go, he still did not want to go. Because, let's face it, Nineveh are Israel's greatest enemy.

And if you take a look at the maps in your Bible, you'll see this was no trivial journey that Jonah was on either. And he gets spat out at the end of chapter 2 somewhere on a beach.

Well, the nearest beach from the Mediterranean to Nineveh is at least two weeks hard walk and possibly longer. So, he is doing something very, very amazing in his obedience.

And he also has to preach the message that God gives him. And it's not an eloquent message, is it? Actually, it's short.

It's offensive. And it's vague. Eight words. Five in the Hebrew, actually.

[9 : 47] 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. That's a sermon. 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Successful evangelism and ministry does not depend on any attribute or talent of us.

It depends on one thing. Our humble availability. And the key is there in verse 3. It's obedience.

Obedience alone that God demands. It is obedience and not eloquence that God requires in evangelism and in mission.

Not our message, but his. And it doesn't matter. And it doesn't matter. Even if the audience's response to your message will be derision or indifference or perhaps persecution.

We simply are required to obey. And if you think about it, Jonah's audience was probably the toughest ever.

[10 : 59] So to the second protagonist then in our story. This depraved and dangerous audience. And because it's so far in the past, what, two and a half thousand years ago.

So it's probably an idea for us to consider what the more recent equivalence of Jonah's mission would be. This is the same as being asked to preach a word of warning in 1939 Berlin at the peak of Nazi belligerence.

Or try denouncing the violent wickedness of the Khmer Rouge in the killing fields of Pol Pot's Cambodia. Or even more close to home.

How about going into the streets of Pyongyang to warn the North Korean dictatorship about pending judgment. That's the scale of God's expectation for Jonah.

He has been sent to the greatest city of his time. This huge, wealthy, powerful, the unrivaled capital of the world. Full of a people who bow to no one.

[12 : 16] I mean this Assyrian capital is in the New York, the Washington, the London, the Beijing of its time.

All combined together. Because they've got no rivals. And they're full of a people who have no regard for Israel. Certainly no regard for Israel's God.

They have no concern for human life. Their default response to any challenge is violence. So we have a people here with no natural tendency at all towards repentance.

And this is the great, great surprise though. The great, mind-blowing miracle. Instead of Jonah being beaten or driven out of the city or even killed as he would have expected.

We read one day into his mission. And verse 5. The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed and all of them from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth.

[13 : 23] When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne. Took off his royal robes. Covered himself with sackcloth. And sat down in the dust.

This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh. By the decree of the king and the nobles. Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything.

Do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered in sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger. And we will not perish. Nineveh is not only a great city in human terms.

Verse 2 could just as easily be rendered. Nineveh is a city great unto God. In other words, it's a place of extreme importance to Yahweh.

[14 : 27] And that's something that a Jew like Jonah would have found very difficult to reconcile. For Ezekiel 33.11 tells us that he, God, takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

So what we have here is a God who cares for the nations. He's always cared for the nations. Pagan or otherwise. And why do Nineveh respond like they do to this eight word message of doom.

Delivered by a scornful and reluctant enemy. Because of verse 5. Nineveh believed God. They didn't believe in God.

For the devils, the demons even believe in God. They believed God. They believed what he had to say through his prophet. What led them to believe is open to a lot of speculation.

You know, we know, given the period that most commentators think Jonah went to Nineveh, that there was some significant events that preceded it. There was famine. There was plague.

[15 : 42] And there was a solar eclipse, which for these superstitious people would have done all kinds of things. So it's possible that you've got a nation receptive to a message of doom.

But ultimately, in spite of all of that, you have to understand that this is a divine miracle nevertheless. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. Because on the surface, this message that Jonah preaches doesn't have enough to warrant the response of the Ninevites.

However, what do we see? They respond with genuine sorrow for sin. And why? Because they were made to realize. It was a simple proposition before them.

Two things. Repent or perish. Turn or die. And they convicted, grief stricken, at the depth of their offense to Israel's God, to Yahweh.

And furthermore, they believed that word. They believed that their destruction was imminent. And they acted on that sorrow. This was not just sorrow for sorrow's sake.

[16 : 52] They changed from their behavior. The king gets to the nub of it because he says, change from your wicked ways and your violence. As I said already, this is a city whose probably greatest characteristic is violence.

And violence towards others is an offense to God. And this was their great. So we see from the greatest to the smallest. A national turning from sin.

The likes we will never see again. And I shouldn't say that because anything is possible with God. But we certainly haven't seen in history any record of anything like this.

And if you have any doubts about the veracity of this transformation, we have Jesus' own words in Matthew chapter 12 to guide us.

He says that this was a people truly saved. Because he actually, when he's talking to the Pharisees, he says to them, their unbelieving Pharisees, he says, these Ninevites will one day sit in judgment over you Pharisees.

[18 : 00] And we know from 1 Corinthians 6 verse 2, that it is only the saints who will judge the world. So you can be sure that the Ninevites of Jonah's day will be counted among the righteous.

But looking closer at the actual content of the message of Jonah's sermon, we can only see doom and threat. Where are the conditional statements?

Where's the plea to repent? What's the basis for this amazing response? Now, it is possible that they knew something of Jonah's own amazing deliverance, in spite of his rebellion.

But the real key in the message is the time limit. You see, 40 days, the 40 days that God has given them, is really grace on offer, at its most basic.

And these Assyrians, these Ninevites, they throw themselves on the mercy of God. Because as the king himself said, who knows, God may yet, he may yet relent, he may yet change his mind.

- [19 : 22] And the king's statement is the very substance of faith. It's not presumptuous at all. Rather, effectively, and probably even unknowingly, he acknowledges the nature of God, and trusts, and gets the people to trust in God to be true to his true nature.

And it worked. Because we already know the fundamental truth that we found in chapter 2. Salvation comes from the Lord.

It comes from nowhere else. It comes from the Lord. And we also have this, that every warning in the Bible, every threat of judgment, is always conditional.

There are four warnings. And because they exist, there is already an opportunity to escape the coming judgment. You know, we have these statements of incredible mercy.

Jeremiah 18, 7 and 8, Joel 2.13, and many others. If a nation repents, God will relent. You know, we sometimes have this view of the Old Testament of only the wrath of God.

- [20 : 45] It's not true. It's chock full of God's mercy. And what we have here, in Nineveh's case, is a deliberate, gracious gift of God alone.

And Jonah 4, verse 1, Andrew will preach on this next week. You'll see, Jonah was well aware of this from the start. He says, God, I knew you were like this. That's why I didn't want to cope.

I knew you love relenting. And so, we have to ask ourselves, why does God work this miracle?

I mean, why Nineveh? Why would he do what he's done? Well, there's a good possibility that it's to provoke Israel, because he often did that, to holy jealousy, so that they would respond in righteousness and faithfulness to him.

And it's also that God is revealing his true character to the world. And so, in Nineveh, we have a foretaste of the gospel going to all nations.

- [21 : 48] And that's for our great benefit, isn't it? Nineveh is the example of what God can do for every person and with every person. And that's the great miracle.

Greater than the fish. Nineveh's repentant response, unlikely as it is, causes God to stay his promised judgment.

But what then does it tell us about our third protagonist? Does God change his mind? Well, verse 10, when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Wow. This is exactly what verse 10 seems to imply, doesn't it? In fact, if any of you have got the King James version, it actually uses the word repent.

You know, God repented and did not bring the judgment. But how do we reconcile this then with what we know generally from scripture?

- [22 : 57] Which, overwhelmingly, there are so many verses I could quote that God is immutable. That he is unchanging, unchangeable. Numbers 23, verse 19, God is not a man that he should change his mind, nor does he have regrets about any of his actions.

2 Samuel 15, 29 says, God will not lie, nor have regret, for he is not a man. And yet, Ezekiel 33 tells us that God, who in spite of telling the wicked that he will surely die, will not kill those who restore his pledge.

So what do we have here? God judges those who sin, clearly, but he also relents in the face of repentance because this is his nature.

This is the God we serve. Be careful. Take clear note here. I do not say he relents because we do enough good.

No. He relents when we repent and turn away from our sin and obey.

[24 : 21] So how does God change then? This is not a trivial question. Malachi 3, verse 6. Without Malachi 3, verse 6, we're all in deep trouble.

For I, the Lord, do not change, therefore you are not consumed. So our assurance, our hope, is in an unchanging, immutable God. Or James 1, verse 17.

Every good gift is from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of change. well, it's because the Hebrew word *Nehem* used here in relation to God is not so much a change of mind or a change of heart as it would be in relation to us as it is a change of course en route to his ultimate goal.

God's objective in this case has always been the repentance and salvation of Nineveh. But there's a fundamental obstacle in the way.

And this obstacle is the wicked, the arrogant wickedness of Nineveh. God not only knows what is going to happen, John 4 will confirm that, but he engineered what has happened in Nineveh.

[25 : 47] Nothing or nobody has forced his hand. You have to understand, his threat of judgment was specifically designed to cause Nineveh's repentance.

It's what we call a means of grace. And this is always his call to you and I too. His means of grace, the means by which he brings you to repentance.

So from this account we see that salvation, reconciliation with God is a three-step process. you have to first come to the understanding, the awareness, the knowledge that you are under threat of destruction.

You are under threat of being overturned. And that turning to God in repentance and hope is your only way. Because delivery is only by the mercy of God.

it was Israel's continued experience in the wilderness, at Sinai, under the judges, etc., etc.

[26 : 52] And Israel's pattern is now being shown to extend to the nations and will do right throughout salvation history, even down to our time. it's because compassion is the primary attribute of our God.

Ezekiel 18, verse 32 says, For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. So, turn and live.

And we who can look back to Christ, we see the greatest expression of that compassion. Ironically, there is a sense, however, in which God's threat to Nineveh is fulfilled.

You see, the Ninevites have been overturned. They have been changed. While they probably correctly understood overturning to mean their calamity, in a cosmic sense, they have been overturned but to righteousness.

instead of the destruction they deserved. And that's the same miracle that happened in your and my hearts as well. A righteousness was ultimately won for them as it was for us in the death of Christ at Calvary.

[28 : 12] His atoning sacrifice for all sin. So, what are the lessons we take? Well, the first one is obey. God works in this world using flawed human beings.

He could simply and probably more effectively have used His messenger angels to take His gospel message out to the world. But instead, He uses us.

All He asks, though, is your obedience. To go where He sends and to speak His words. Not yours. You see, we don't have to persuade.

We don't have to convince. We don't have to inveigle. Certainly, in the way we try today, we don't have to entertain people with the gospel. We only have to proclaim its simple message.

And the Holy Spirit does the rest. Preaching the fear of God and His warnings is not comforting. It's not comfortable for sure.

[29 : 19] But it is the only way that anyone ever comes to know the salvation of the Lord. And we don't do our listeners any favors either when we shrink from this.

You know, because we're afraid of being called old-fashioned or afraid of being called judgmental, more likely these days. the warning others of the consequences of sin is actually the kindest thing you can do for anyone.

Obedience is also critical more broadly for us as a church or as a community because even the greatest revivals are short-lived. You know, in the case of Nineveh, by the very next generation, they were even more vicious than this one.

We see it in the case of Sennacherib who besieged Jerusalem and who hated Yahweh. And ultimately Nineveh was destroyed. Because every generation lasts one or two generations at best, we need continual renewal and repentant faith.

Vigilance that we might keep the light of the gospel burning. And that is obedience. The second lesson for us is repentance. Because there is no salvation.

[30 : 44] I'm going to be very, very clear here. There is no salvation without repentance. And there is no repentance without conviction of sin.

No one is going to repent unless they are told about their sin. And there is no conviction unless it's a message of judgment and the consequences of sinfulness.

And it's not true repentance either. Unless it is accompanied by a turning away. A turning away from sin. Not some general turning away. For most of us it's a turning away from specific sins.

Things that are brought to our hearts, our consciences by the Holy Spirit. In the case of Nineveh it was their violence more specifically. it's not as I said some general intention of the heart.

It's deliberate, thorough going, grief caused effort to eradicate things in our lives which are an abomination to God. And the third lesson is that it is God alone.

[31 : 49] It is only about God. He alone saves. And because of that our salvation, yours and mine, is no less miraculous than Nineveh's.

For like Nineveh there was nothing we could do but to fall on the mercy of God alone and trust him to be true to his revealed nature and his reputation for being a promise-keeping God.

And he's the God who showed his love to both the rebellious prophet on the one hand and the wicked nation. And he shows that love an equal measure. If you're in this congregation today and you're not a believer, you need to know this one thing for sure.

There is no one, no one unreachable by God's grace. There is enough hope here in this message for the most contemptible sinner.

Because if Nineveh can be saved, then there is certainly nothing you have ever done to keep you from God's mercy and grace. Because ultimately, every act of salvation is a divine act.

[33 : 06] It is equally as unlikely as Nineveh's and equally miraculous. And I don't think there is a believer in this church who will not echo their agreement.

Our salvation is nothing of ourselves. Left to our own devices, our natural proclivity is to flee God. We do not flee to Him, we flee from Him.

And nor is conviction by itself conversion. You know very well how often you're genuinely ashamed by your wickedness.

But without God at work, this is still worthless. unless it is God who arrests us in our tracks, unless it is He who illumines our minds so that we can understand the gospel, unless He is the one who turns this cold heart into a heart of flesh and makes me and you hate our iniquity and desire only to please Him, unless He gives us the faith to trust Him, it's all in vain.

But, and this is the great but, He is gracious, He's full of tender mercy, and what's more, His warnings are everywhere.

[34 : 27] They surround us. And if you, like Nineveh, will only open your eyes and your ears, He will save.