

Repentance

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[0 : 00] Good evening, church. My name's David. As Jeff was saying before, I go to the 1030 service over at St. John's, and I was part of HDD congregation here for a long time as well.

So it's great to be back sharing with you about Jonah 3 today. I wonder if any of you have ever experienced a sense of déjà vu, you know, that sense that sometimes comes sweeping over you suddenly, that, oh, I feel like I've been here before.

I felt it last year at the worst possible time. It was in my final day at work, just before heading off onto my Christmas break. Suddenly, déjà vu.

I think I've been in this day before. And then this moment of dread, right? It's like, what if I'm stuck in this final day of work, never able to go onto my holidays?

I wonder if Jonah has a little bit of this feeling of dread as well as we start chapter 3. Jonah's alarm clock goes off in the morning.

[1 : 11] Look, last night he was vomited out from a fish. So he's feeling pretty lousy. And just before he can hit that snooze button, he hears that voice again.

Hey, Jonah. Yeah, it's me. God, yeah. Yeah, I'm still going to need you to go to Nineveh, mate. So that's what we're seeing here in chapter 3. If we look at verse 1, it says, The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me.

Only, it doesn't, does it? That's actually what it says in verse 1, chapter 1 from two weeks ago. But déjà vu, verse 1, chapter 3 repeats things.

Let's take a look. It's the same thing there. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Same thing, a second time. Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.

[2 : 27] See how by repeating the command to go to the great city of Nineveh, we get this sense of déjà vu. There's a repetition, a parallel, a recurrence.

There's a repetition, a parallel, a recurrence. What happened in chapter 1 is now happening again. This is the same call Jonah heard earlier.

Nothing has changed. But what's going to happen this time? What's Jonah going to do? And for first-time listeners, they're like leaning forward in their chair at this point.

Well, plot twist. Jonah this time obeys the word of the Lord and walks to Nineveh. I guess being swallowed by a fish changes a man.

Because there's a perseverance here in Jonah's obedience. Geographically, this journey is a demanding journey. We're talking 900 or so miles across desert routes.

[3 : 33] In Aussie terms, it's like walking from Geelong up to Newcastle. Only like even hotter. And like there's no highways. And the city itself, in verse 3 there, it's described as a great city.

Very large. Three days, it says, to go through it to get God's message out. And if you excuse me, my dad joke moment, you might say that Jonah is walking in obedience.

Thank you. And yet, even though Jonah does demonstrate a quite literal change in direction, I don't think that's all we're seeing here.

There's also an overarching change in focus. While Jonah himself does a physical turn from west to east, the book of Jonah does a spiritual turn and tilts its gaze upwards from Jonah to God.

I wonder if you can see it. If we look at that slide again, see how even though there's this repetition, there's also differences. Can you see it there?

[4 : 45] There's kind of this, it's subtle, but there's kind of this subtle shift in agency, I see. Jonah's role shifts slightly from being more active to being something more passive.

Less Jonah-reliant, more God-dependent. It's no longer on Jonah as such for him to go out and preach against Nineveh.

No, instead, the message that he is to proclaim is a message that the Lord will now simply give to him. And for the eagle-eyed who like to read more into it, even his title or his attribution gets truncated.

No longer Jonah, son of Amittai. In chapter 3, it's just Jonah. See, Jonah is God's messenger in the purest form here.

In some sense, it doesn't really matter how passionate he's feeling about God's call, and we'll get more to that in chapter 4, how much he's vibing it.

[5 : 45] His is merely to obey, to go, to proclaim. The Lord will bring the thunder. God's the one with the message.

And so, what is this message that God gives Jonah to proclaim? And what's right there for us in verse 4?

Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown. Eight words. That's it. It's pretty plain.

A warning of imminent destruction in less than a tweet. Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.

Plain and simple. So, our message today from this chapter we're looking at is, it's God who saves people from destruction. It's God who saves people from destruction.

[6 : 43] And the first point to note here, then, is that it's God's message. It's God's message that people need to be saved, even when his messenger is reluctant, even when the message itself feels plain and simple.

And, you know, what a relief that is. Maybe you felt a little embarrassed at times. I know if you've been a Christian for a while, God's call can feel kind of repetitive.

The message sometimes feels, maybe it's a little too plain. A bit too simple. People have heard it before. We need to spice it up. Make it more relevant.

Make it stand out. Find the hook. Coin the catchphrase. Well, in a weird kind of way, Jonah 3 affirms some of the underlying suspicion, because the *deja vu* repetition that we're getting in chapter 3 reminds us that God's call for Nineveh does remain consistent.

God's warning is plain and clear. 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. God's call for Jonah is unchanging.

[7 : 58] And that's actually a good thing. See, without short attention spans, repetition can breed familiarity. It feels simplistic.

But for God, repetition reveals his unchanging and eternal character. God is the message giver. And God's message reflects God's steadfast nature, God's consistency, God's patience, God's remembrance and perseverance.

He's patient for his people. We see in Jonah 3 a consistent and persistent call to proclaim one plain and simple message.

Over days and nights and thousands of miles, God says to the Ninevites, the path you are on, please listen, you need to hear this.

[9 : 00] This path will only lead to your destruction. And that's the message that the great city of Nineveh, just like the great city of Melbourne, needs to hear.

And it's not Jonah's message, it's God's. And God's message is still what people need to hear. So let's turn now to look at how Nineveh reacts.

It's big. We read in verse 5 that the Ninevites, the whole of this great city, it seems, believes God. So, back in 2011, there was an earthquake in Washington, D.C.

And at the time, the Washington Post had a headline that's up there for you there. They wrote, tweets began pouring in from Washington, D.C., nearly 30 seconds before we felt the quake at our headquarters in New York City.

See, people were receiving messages on their phones ahead of feeling the tremors, warning them in advance that an earthquake was fast approaching. Such is the miracle of Twitter.

[10 : 20] And that's what we're seeing here in verses 5 to 9, in a way. This message going out ahead of imminent destruction. God's warning goes out and it spreads like wildfire.

40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Have you heard? Have you heard? Passing from one person to the next. Because Jonah's just done one day of preaching here and yet that message is the spark that catches flame.

God spreads his message warning the Ninevites of the coming destruction. And we see what happens. Verse 5, the Ninevites believed God.

A fast was proclaimed and all of them from the greatest to the least. Even the king himself will foresee in verse 6 puts on sackcloth. It's an eight-word sermon that saves thousands from destruction.

Such is the true miracle of God. In his commentary, Martin Luther described it like this. In view of this, I'm tempted to say that no apostle or prophet, not even Christ himself, performed and accomplished with a single sermon the great things Jonah did.

[11:38] His conversion of the city of Nineveh with one sermon is surely as great a miracle as his rescue from the belly of the whale, if not an even greater one.

See, our Sunday school focus stories maybe got it wrong. The greatest miracle in Jonah is not a fish. It's a sermon. It's God who saves people from destruction.

Because it's certainly not the preacher. I mean, why is the most reluctant of messengers also the most successful? I think that's to remind us of this truth.

It's not Jonah dependent. It's God reliant. First, God gave the message. Now, God spreads his message. It's God who saves people from destruction.

God is the one at work in people's hearts to hear his message. God is the one at work drawing people to himself. See, it's God's power that draws people to repentance.

[12:45] And we see what the shape of that repentance looks like in verse 6. And I love this imagery of the king of Nineveh that we see there. It's so illustrative. The king of Nineveh literally gets down from his throne.

He literally dethrones himself, unrobes himself of any kingly markers. The king of Nineveh will he throw himself down at the mercy of the true king, the Lord God.

And his proclamation that we read in verse 7 and 8 is all people and animals must fast. No food or drink, not even a taste to show sacrifice and self-denial before God.

Instead, all people, even animals, are to be covered in sackcloth to show humility and submission before God. They turn from their ways that they give up their evil ways.

God is the one who opens people's eyes, who reveals to us our need to repent, to turn from our own ways, to recognize the one, to rely on him for a way out.

[13:57] So, if that's true, how does that shape our expectations for how people hear our message, hear God's message, today? Because we can still feel nervous, can't we?

We can still feel a bit scared. What if I come across as self-righteous? Have you seen this great city of Melbourne? This is the world's most livable city, a warning of destruction?

Get out of my face, will be the response. This is a secular country, a warning about wickedness and evil. That sort of language, that's ignorant and harmful.

So, I find myself making these assumptions, these kind of value judgments about, is it really worth bothering to share the gospel with that guy?

I mean, Francis, he's a passionate atheist. God's message is going to sound naive to him. Rose, she lectures in women's studies, she's in a long-term same-sex relationship.

[15:05] The church is oppressive and hurtful to her, to society, actually, to her friends. And Ian, Ian's got it together. He's a senior professional, living in the suburbs.

The gospel's irrelevant to Ian. And Brian, well, Brian's all about living for now. He's about sticking it to the man.

And the gospel is the man. Yet, here in this chapter, we see that everybody, from the least to the greatest, hears the message and heeds the warning.

See, it's God's power that draws people to repentance. God is the one who is at work to help people, to recognize that, yeah, you know what, in the end.

If you think about it, death and destruction is certain. He reveals that living for yourself isn't freedom, it's a path to self-destruction.

[16:09] We all see the evil out there in the big wide world today, don't we? But God helps us to see that the seed of all that evil isn't out there, but starts in here.

even as you sit here, maybe offended by this message of destruction, God is at work in you, inescapably, irreversibly, like a stone in your shoe.

God is at work revealing that it's true. See, even the people in Jesus' day, also doubted who he claimed to be.

They also doubted his message and they asked for signs. From the New Testament reading today, teacher, we want a sign from you, say the Pharisees, prove you are who you say you are.

And Jesus in answering actually refers back to this very moment that we're reading about here in Jonah 3. He says in verse 41, the men of Nineveh, the people we've been reading about, will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.

[17:24] See, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And now, something greater than Jonah is here. Jesus is even greater than Jonah.

But people are still asking for signs, aren't they? Clever arguments to convince them. And look, there are convincing arguments for the Christian faith.

in the New Testament reading that we had, he refers to his own death and resurrection. And if you're skeptical, then I ask you to take an honest look at that.

Research that for yourself. But where people ask for signs, Jesus instead answers by asking them for a response.

Because ultimately, people aren't convinced. people are convicted. And only God can convict. All those people from before that I mentioned are actually all real life unlikely converts.

[18:33] Francis, that's Francis Collins, the first guy up there. He's the director of the NIH and the former head of the Human Genome Project. He realized his atheist objections were actually schoolboy arguments.

But what actually convicted him of God's reality was the awe of nature and creation. Rose is Rosaria Butterfield.

She was a tenured women's study lecturer. And Christian hospitality and community welcomed her in. And she even wrote a book about it. But if you read her testimony, what convicted her was this gnawing question, what if it's true?

Ian Harper sits on the board of the RBA. He lives here in Melbourne. Upon first seeing a library at a Bible college, he was convicted of his own ignorance and naivety.

There was a depth and a rigor to Christian faith that he was oblivious to and he needed to find out more. And Brian is Brian Head Welch.

[19:39] he's a lead guitarist for a rap metal band Korn. But he was also a father in a destructive relationship with his daughter.

And God's love convicted them both and showed them a way out from that brokenness. See, in a sense, every convert is an unlikely convert.

I know I am. Because God is the one who convicts us. He uses people, yes, like Jonah, like you, like me, but it's God's power that draws people to repentance.

So we see now that it's God's message that's important, even when the messenger is reluctant. It's God's power that's important. God's the one that draws people to repentance.

Now we see the end goal here for Nineveh. Now we see God's compassion in action in these last verses, 9 and 10. In verse 9, who knows, says the king of Nineveh.

[20:43] Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. Who knows?

See, if you look carefully at Jonah's sermon, you'll find in it that there was actually no hint of recourse. 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

No recourse. No call to repentance. No way out. God's message to the Ninevites is a ticking clock. Just like tweets before an incoming earthquake, it's simply a warning.

Brace yourselves. A message from God that only talks about destruction. Destruction without recourse. we might recoil at such a lopsided sounding message.

And yet, it's the Ninevites who hear its truth. It's the Ninevites whose wickedness has come up before the Lord, who recognize that just like an incoming earthquake, they can't save themselves.

[21:52] If the problem lies inside, salvation must come from the outside. Who knows? God, may yet relent, they say, and with compassion turn so we won't perish.

Maybe, just maybe, there's a chance. God, relent. God, show compassion. And God does.

He reveals his compassion and relents in 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 threatened.

See, Jonah, through a storm, through the belly of a fish, he's finally obeyed the call, preached the message, and God has relented. But this outcome is not merely the result of Jonah's one special day in town.

God's compassion. It's God who saves people from destruction. God's compassion here is the culmination of three chapters of God's work.

[23 : 03] Remember, we have to tilt our gaze upwards. It's not really Jonah's story, first and foremost. Chapter 3 reminds us it's been God's story all along.

God has been at the one at work this whole time, working through Jonah, working through the storm and the fish. Three chapters to draw the Ninevites to a place where God now relents, saving them from destruction.

It's been God's message to the Ninevites, it's been God's power that spreads the message, and now we know that God is steadfast, consistent, and persistent. So this whole journey, this whole journey has been an unfolding of God's compassion.

He longs to relent. In a way, we don't need the greatest mission strategy, or apologetics training, or practiced testimony.

These are all good things, but our message and our preaching shouldn't rely on wise and persuasive words, because belief is not through our wisdom, but rests on God's power.

[24 : 12] Be like Jonah isn't the key takeaway here. Instead, look up, because God is at work, and what a humbling privilege it is to be a part of that.

And you know what? The Ninevites, they repented in desperation, throwing themselves before the mercy of God, never really sure of the outcome.

God may yet relent. It's a desperate plea, just hoping for God's mercy. But for us today, this hope is now certain.

We can hope with expectancy, because God has already showed his compassion ultimately, and once for all.

God sent his son, Jesus, to save all people from destruction, before we even existed, waiting for when we repent, Christ died, so we might live.

[25 : 18] So, while back then the Ninevites could only look forward, now today, each and every one of us can look back, expectant, that when we repent, God will relent, and with compassion turn, so we won't perish.

In Jesus, that desperate plea of the Ninevites is now a beacon of assurance for the whole world. God's message remains.

He's drawing people to repent, and he longs to relent. Let's pray. Lord God, we pray that like Jonah, we obey, that we go, that we proclaim, but we pray, Lord, that we do so knowing that it is your message that people need to hear, that it is you at work in people's hearts to convict them of their inner sin, their need for you, and we pray that you are at work in their hearts for them to repent and turn to you.

And above all, Lord, we thank you that you have shown us that you are a God of compassion once and for all by sending your son Jesus to die for us, to save us from destruction.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.