

Cried Out, The City Caved In

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- [0 : 00] I'd like to begin by saying that whatever that passage is, it isn't the third chapter of Jonah. And as I listened quietly there, I thought, hey, what's that?
- So if you'd like to, you can all take that piece of paper and go like this, unless you'd like to keep notes on the back, because is anybody smart enough to know what it is the third chapter of?
- Because it's not Jonah. Well, there it is. So I'm sorry that you don't have the text in front of you. But I have it in front of me, or Will shortly.
- And I may even read it to you to sort of put you... Or Debbie, do you want to try this one? It's just short. And we'll just make a correction.
- Jonah, talk to me. And the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, come to the great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.
- [1 : 09] So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was a exceedingly great city, three days' journey of breath. Jonah began to go into the city during the day's journey.
- And he cried, And God said, Let neither man nor beast, bird nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. And let them cry out of God. Yea, let anyone turn from the evil way, and from the violence which is in his hand.
- Who knows God, who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we will not perish. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them, and he did not know it.
- Thank you. Thank you. The question is today, how do you get a city to repent? And it's an interesting question.
- [2 : 45] The thing that you should keep in mind as you think about this chapter is that wonderful gospel verse, God so loved the world.
- And as a kind of an example of the world that God loved, you have in the heart of the Old Testament the city of Nineveh. These were the people whom God loved.
- But how could he communicate his love to that city? It wasn't an easy thing to do. I'm sure that God takes great delight in modern cities in some ways.
- I'm sure that there's much that breaks his heart, but that he must be delighted with the architecture at times. He must be delighted with the technological insights that people have.
- He must be delighted with design and order and art and all sorts of things that emerge from the city. He must be delighted because that is the product of the people whom God loves, whom he has set his love upon.
- [3 : 58] But at the same time, he must have a great longing that they would know more than that, that they would understand more deeply what it is to be loved by God.

Now, on the front page of the Globe and Mail business section this morning, there's a wonderful sort of microcosm of the city in the problems of Mr. Tilly, of Tilly's Endurables.

I don't like his hat very much, but the fact that it looks silly and all sorts of people wear it shows that he's a good salesman.

Any of you who have one, you just have to pardon that. But when I see him advertising in that section in the Globe and Mail, which he's done for many years, I think to myself, gosh, I wish I was smart enough.

I could have figured that out and done that, and that's the way I'd like to do it. And why didn't I think of something like that? I'm very impressed with Mr. Tilly. But on the front page of the business section this morning, Mr. Tilly is in deep trouble.

[5 : 11] And the trouble is that Mr. Tilly has a partner. And Mr. Tilly is the entrepreneur who knows how to sell this stuff, but his partner is described in the Globe and Mail as a number cruncher.

And so you have these two partners, one, this brilliant entrepreneur, Mr. Tilly, and the other, his number crunching partner.

And they started out in a relationship of mutual convenience. Now, I'm only telling you this story not to indict Mr. Tilly or his partner, but to show you that this is what is at the heart of the city.

I mean, it's typical. It's a kind of microcosm that some of you perhaps can identify with in personal terms. So it turns out that the judge before whom they are appearing, because the number cruncher wants to take the company away from Mr. Tilly, and the judge says, oh, no, you can't because the company is Mr. Tilly.

But it says that they started out in a partnership of mutual convenience. And this partnership of mutual convenience deteriorated thoroughly through the various stages of animosity, harassment, sabotage, malice, and weapons offenses.

[6 : 38] So you see the breakdown. And that's why the heart of God is deeply concerned for the city, because despite all the wonderful appearances, there is at the heart of it some animosities and some divisions and some tension and harassment, and the whole thing becomes violent.

So that the city lives in the constant battle before the judges of this group and that group, saying who's right and who's wrong, who gets the money and who gets the boot, and all that goes on all the time in the city, trying to find out some way in which they can survive in the city.

A constant battle. And you get the people who are for nuclear free zones, and then you get the military establishment fighting with each other.

You get the liberals with the conservatives and all the political infighting. And on and on it goes. And different people are always at work in the city, saying that the problem of the city is that person over there.

Now, Jonah was not really unique in what he did, because he went to Nineveh and preached repentance. And in a city like ours, there's lots of people preaching repentance all the time.

[8 : 08] If you guys were like me, this city would be all right, so why don't you change? And that message, with a lot of variations to it and a lot of particulars added into it, is the message that we hear all the time.

If only you were like me, our city would be a great place. So Jonah goes to the city, having had this recent experience of being thrown overboard, swallowed by a whale, spent three days there, survived that, was vomited up on the beach, and then he went to the city.

And he stood in the city, and he preached. Now, when anybody stands up to preach in a city, they could be accused of political sedition or propaganda and shot.

They could be identified as opposing the interests of the government and put into prison. They could be thought of as a madman and sent to a mental hospital.

They could be identified with some secret economic scheme and philosophy and be ostracized. They could pose as an expert on how to run the city and be debated with.

[9 : 43] But none of those things happened to Jonah. What happened to Jonah was that he stood up and gave the message that he was supposed to give, and the city received it as a word expressing a decision that God had come to with respect to the city, that in 40 days Nineveh would be destroyed.

And they accepted it. Why they accepted it, we don't know. But I want to talk a bit more about it. But just think for a minute about this city of Nineveh, a great city which we're told was three days' journey across.

It happens, and I think this is at least interesting. It happens to have been in the modern state of Iraq on the Tigris River.

It was, we learn from Jonah, ruled by kings and nobles. It was inhabited by herds and flocks and much cattle.

We don't think of them as being in the city, but that's because we have a different kind of a city. When I was in Nairobi a couple of years ago, we went to the missionary guest house and were taken to a little room up on the third floor and looked down into a little quadrangle of grass, which was down behind the guest house, and there was a lovely little white billy goat tethered.

[11 : 21] And I thought, well, that's very interesting. I wonder why they'd have a goat there. And I asked the person who took us up, what's the goat there for? And she said, for supper. So I, it was a sort of, an alternative to a deep freeze.

You know what I mean? But you can imagine that in other kinds of cities that run by different means, that there might be lots of animals in the city.

So that the, it was, there were herds and flocks. We're told from Jonah that there was 120,000 people in the city. We were told, we're told also that it is dominated.

I mean, archaeologists tell us this. It doesn't come out in the book of Jonah, but it was dominated by the worship of Ishtar, as most cities were. And so that the temple of Ishtar was the great building at the center of the city.

It was, it was a city which was extremely powerful militarily so that violence was the way they controlled the people, which is not unlike Iraq today, that sheer raw violence is the means by which the city is ruled and by which the conquests of the city were known and by which the city was respected all around the Mediterranean world because of their ability to produce violence.

[12 : 56] Violence was the pragmatic of the city. And it says a very interesting thing about the city that there were these 120,000 people who didn't know their left hand from their right, which means they didn't know good from evil.

so that what happens in a city is you get certain pragmatic realities which distort your understanding of good and evil so that you lose touch with it.

It is necessary to do it this way in order to produce this result. If you expect a return, a profit at the end of the year, then you must do it this way.

In the dog-eat kind of, when the dog-eat-dog world that we live in, it's necessary to do it this way. And so once you become thoroughly immersed in the city, you know your way around the city, you know how to get things done in the city, there is some considerable chance that you too will arrive at the place where you don't know your left hand from your right.

The distinction between good and evil is lost to you. And you see accounts of that in the paper all the time. A small business is started, the business grows, the money comes in, the fame of the product goes out, everything happens, and soon the people at the head of it have lost the ability to distinguish between good and evil.

[14 : 29] And that was characteristic of this city of Nineveh into which Jonah went and where he did his thing. So if you look at the third chapter of Jonah, you'll see that it begins in quite a remarkable way when it says, the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.

That shows sort of the patience of God. It also can be biographical of our own lives that the word of the Lord has come to us at some point in our lives.

We have turned away from the word of the Lord. We have headed off in the opposite direction. We've gone our own way to do our own thing according to our own light.

And in the mercy and grace of God, he brings us back to the point where we will hear again, not something new and more sophisticated, which would be more acceptable to us as we are now, but the same word comes to Jonah again, exactly the same.

And it's a mark of the grace of God. And I think that spiritually, we get easily into the position where we are running away from the word of the Lord as it was given to us in the first place.

[15 : 49] And the only place you can come back to is the same word from God, the same encounter with God in his word. So that's what happened to Jonah. And Jonah was told that he, in exactly the same way as it says it in the first chapter, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.

Jonah was able to hear it and obey it. Now many people hear the word of God many times, often, before they're in a position to hear it and obey it.

When they hear it, they move in the opposite direction. One of the great delights about preaching the gospel is to see the negative reaction it creates in so many people.

I mean, it just stirs up old wounds. It stirs up old fears. It stirs up old hate. It stirs up all sorts of opposition in the minds and hearts of people. You've said something very simple and very loving about the nature and character of God, and suddenly you have a monster before you who is so hurt by the suggestion that that's what God wants of him or her, that they move off in the opposite direction.

Well, this was... Jonah had changed, and he was able to hear this word of God and to obey it. And it's a wonderful, wonderful moment in one's life when you can hear the word of God.

[17 : 28] And you can get up many mornings and not be able to hear it, and your prayer might be, Lord, help me to hear your word. My ear is sensitive and my gut is sensitive to a whole lot of things, but what I need to hear in this situation is your word.

And I need to be enabled to obey it. And to be in that place is a very privileged place indeed. And that was the place that Jonah found himself in after God had graciously taken him through his little adventure at sea.

Well, Jonah delivers his message, the message that God had given him. And the message was very simple. Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

It was clear, it was decisive, it was, it had one direction to it, and it just fell on Nineveh. That was all there was to it.

It was the, that God, patience had run out, the wrath of God was all that Nineveh could expect, and all that they deserved, and this wrath would fall on Nineveh in forty days.

[18 : 43] And how did they treat it? They treated it as a word from God. Not from some holy roller preacher from down the corner.

Not a word from any human being, because it says of Nineveh that they believed God. Now that's the great advantage of being a preacher, is that you don't have to believe me.

And my job is not to persuade you to believe me. And you can walk away from here contemptuous of what you have heard me say. But if, by chance, in the midst of all the words with which you are drowned in the course of a session like this, you hear the word of God and believe that, that could be a very remarkable point in your life, couldn't it?

And that was the remarkable point in the life of Nineveh. While they heard Jonah, they believed God. I go away from here lots of times, smarting with embarrassment at the foolish things I've said or the fool I've made of myself, and think, next week I will be somewhere else doing something else.

But the fact of the matter is the function that God entrusts is to say, to give the message that you're given and not to worry about the market value of it.

[20 : 27] Because Jonah, as you will see next week, if you will only come back, thought the market value of the message which he was giving was zero. He had no confidence in whatever.

In fact, he thought God was cheating because he knew that God had another agenda. But he didn't tell Nineveh about the other agenda. He just gave the message that God gave him to give.

Forty days, you're done. The wrath of God will fall upon Nineveh. That's all he said. And Jonah had to learn to trust that if that's what God wanted said, then God must know what he's doing.

And lots of people think that you shouldn't preach what is it? Fire and brimstone or whatever it is. But that you shouldn't be a kind of morbid prophet.

But God can take his message and bring it to his people so that in spite of the fact that the prophet isn't very satisfied with what he has to say, that that word can be received by people and that they turn to God in faith.

[21 : 42] And that's what Nineveh did. It's a quite remarkable event. Jonah didn't give his own opinion.

He knew, and you find this out, you know, he knew that when he says to God in the next chapter, he said, I know that you're a God of steadfast love and that this message that I'm giving to Nineveh doesn't tell the whole story.

And I knew you weren't going to let them know that you were a God of steadfast love. Jonah gets very angry about it next week. But he gives them the message that the condemnation, the wrath of God will fall upon them in 40 days, will fall upon the city that God loves.

Not because it's lovable, but because God has chosen to love it as he has chosen to love the world in which we live. well, the wonderful thing is that the city was wonderfully united because it wasn't a matter of one of them saying, this is how you ought to behave or somebody getting the high moral ground and saying, this is what you people ought to do or somebody saying, this is how you ought to behave.

It was that they had heard from God and hearing from God, they repented from the king to the cattle all the way down the whole social scale.

[23 : 14] They all repented and they fasted and they put on sackcloth. Now, you know that what makes a city a city is restaurants and clothing stores.

You know, and any restaurant will give you a \$2 meal for \$27 because they know it satisfies you emotionally. And any tailor will sell you a \$150 suit for \$750 because he knows you need the emotional strength of knowing that you're wearing a \$750 suit.

So he looks after you in that way and restaurateurs look after you in that way and help you satisfy not your hunger because it's quite limited. But your emotional problems they help you deal with and tailors do the same for you.

Well, that's why it's interesting that when repentance came to Nineveh the thing that it hit was the clothes they wear and the food they eat. They stopped eating, they stopped drinking because that was no longer of importance.

To be fed and clothed wasn't really important if you're standing under the judgment of God. And the wonderful thing was that the king stood up and stripped off his royal robes and put on sackcloth and sat in ashes and demanded he and his nobles that the whole city do the same.

[24 : 45] No water, no food to humans or to animals. Now, I don't know if you have ever been near a herd of cows that haven't got access to water.

Well, you can, the cry of repentance that would go up from a city like Nineveh that was full of animals that didn't have water would be very considerable indeed.

Not just the emotional trauma of the human beings, but the cattle and all the rest were cut off and repentance came to the city. Well, the result of this is that when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them and he didn't do it.

When people repent, they are converted, they turn. They turn from their own way, from the violence which was characteristic of the city, they turn to God in repentance.

That's what people do. They get converted through the experience of repentance. I have been wrong, I want to change my ways, I want to go in a new direction.

[26 : 05] And after they repented, then it says that God repented. But when God repented, he didn't change his direction because his direction was still the same.

When God repented, he accepted the cost of forgiving these people. When God repents, he suffers.

When we repent, we turn. And it's like the story of the man who's unfaithful to his wife, and he goes back to her with flowers and chocolates and says, please forgive me.

He repents of what he's done, but she has to pay the price of the suffering, of the ignominy that she has suffered.

She has to pay the price. And that's what it means. Nineveh repented in that they turned, and God repented in that he accepted the cost of forgiving this city.

[27 : 07] He accepted because they were a sinful city. And repenting doesn't change the sin you have done. You know, once you've shot a man between the eyes and say, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, that may be quite genuine, but it does very little for the man with the bullet between his eyes.

He has to suffer the consequences of what you've done. So when men repent, when men and women repent, when the city repents, they turn, but God accepts the consequences of the suffering, which is caused by the sin which they've done.

So you see that this is just a background for the fulfillment of the demonstration of the love of God, who so loved the world, which we see today as Nineveh, that he accepted the suffering of forgiving the world.

And that's what he does for us. When we come to a place of not hearing some idiot preacher spout, but when we come to the point of hearing God speak to us, we believe in him, we turn in repentance and faith to him.

He turns in repentance to us and says, you're forgiven. I accept the consequences of your sin. Now you're free to live a new life.

[28 : 34] And that's the heart of how a city repents and how a citizen of the city repents. let me pray. Our God, we praise and thank you that the word of God came to Jonah a second time.

We pray for one another that the word of God might come to us in the present circumstances of our lives. And that we might hear it and that we might obey it.

That we might share with the citizens of Nineveh a believing in you and a repentance and turning towards you. And that when we stand in the place of just condemnation, when we stand in the place of being subject to the wrath of God, we might know the mercy and love of God, because you accept the suffering, which is the consequence of our sin, and you forgive us.

grant that we as a city may know that, and that we as individuals may know it in our lives. In Christ's name, amen.