

A Message Delivered

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[0 : 0 0] Our Father, as we read about the great city of Nineveh, and how by your grace and in your mercy it was brought to deep repentance, we ask that we may be given a gift of deep repentance, not just in our personal lives, in our corporate life, but in the life of our city, in the culture we belong to. It would be such a new and wonderful gift if we could find a place of repentance. As we hear your word, we ask that you will point our hearts towards it.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. The third chapter of Jonah is found in the Pew Bibles on page 816, the third chapter, and it was read for you just now, but I would very much like you to keep your eye on it as I speak this evening for these few minutes.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.

Just keep in mind this, first off, and that is that there are two kinds of sinners that are illustrated to us in this book. The first kind is the kind that seeks to depart from the presence of the Lord. That's Jonah. When the word of the Lord came to Jonah in chapter 1, Jonah's chief concern was to get out from under the hearing of the word of God. He didn't want to hear it. And so the first two chapters deal with how Jonah was brought to new birth because those two chapters are in a very real sense are in a very graphic Old Testament picture of how one man was brought to the new birth through death and hell and resurrection, through the storm, the whale, and vomiting out on the dry land. So when you start to, with chapter 3, you have a new man. You have now a man who's come to put his faith in the Lord, who wants to be obedient to the Lord, who's prepared to do what the Lord commands him to do. And still, though, he is a sinner of the first order, as you may find out. Now, I think that might be helpful for you because presumably all of you fall into one of those two categories. Either you don't know the Lord and are quite unwilling to obey him, which is entirely understandable. If you don't think it was understandable, read Jonah 1 and 2. He thought it was understandable that you should not be willing to obey the Lord. The second is those who have been brought to the place where in their life they are willing to serve the Lord, but they heartily dislike the way the Lord does things and want to go on and do them their own way. And that's what you read about in chapter 3.

[4 : 1 3] So, there's those two things then that you need to watch for when you're looking at this chapter. When you read it then, it's the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time. One of the gracious realities of the God in whom we believe, the God of the Scriptures, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is that he speaks to us by his word. And he wants us to hear that word. You also may be assured from reading the story that he's not limited to that. He has storms and whales and shipwrecks and all sorts of other ways of speaking to people who are hard of hearing. And so, if you come into that category, you may recognize the Lord speaking to you in circumstances because you won't listen to his word. So, you have that to consider when it says, the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, because this time Jonah was prepared to hear it. The interesting thing, if you compare this with chapter 1, is that the word of the Lord that came to Jonah the second time was exactly the same as the word of the Lord which came to Jonah the first time. The Lord hadn't changed in his purpose. Jonah had changed.

And, you know, if you're waiting for the word of the Lord to change, you wait a long time. His purpose is the same. When he gave it the first time, Jonah was unwilling to obey it. When he gave it the second time, Jonah was ready to listen to the word of the Lord. And the word was simply, "Arise and go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Jonah wasn't to think out a message that he thought would be suitable for the city of Nineveh.

He had to go and deliver the message that the Lord gave him to deliver. Jonah was to think out a message that the Lord had to be able to do the word of the Lord.

And so he proceeded to do that in verse 3, Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now, a slight interruption because I want to tell you a little bit about the city of Nineveh. The city of Nineveh is in the country of Iraq. It's on the Tigris River. It was a magnificent capital of the Assyrian Empire, which flourished between the 9th and the 7th centuries BC. Subsequently, it was lost in the deserts. And when you come to the early part of the last century, nobody knew where Nineveh was. And part of the general disbelief that surrounds our secular world about the book of Jonah was endorsed by the fact that nobody could find the city of Nineveh anyway.

[7 : 37] And so it was in 1842 that the French consulate in Mesopotamia, as it was then, went and at his own expense began to dig around some peculiar mounds of dirt, which he suspected might be Nineveh. But having spent a good deal of his money and getting nothing for his efforts, he then moved on to another area which he thought would be more fruitful.

And indeed it was. He found, it was some miles away, but he found all sorts of ancient ruins of huge Assyrian palaces. But then three years later, along came a British archaeologist and dug where he had given up digging and it was he that found the city of Nineveh, buried in the sands of time. Now, the city of Nineveh is spoken of in the scriptures. It's spoken of in Genesis when it talks about the various nations upon earth and Assyrian kings that persecuted the people of God. And, uh, but the interesting thing I want to tell you about it is a reference made to it by Northrop Frye, which, uh, which, uh, always has helped me see some of the significance of the huge city of Nineveh and the little man called Jonah who marched bravely up to the walls and stamped his feet and said, yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Well, uh, Northrop Frye says that, uh, uh, the people of Israel were very poor builders. They couldn't build worth the darn. And whenever they wanted to build something, they had to import from Hiram, king of Tyre, or skilled workmen from other nations to come in and build their city and build their temple for them because they were no good at it. While Assyria were master builders of a great city. But Northrop Frye points out that the great city of Nineveh built by the Assyrians was lost for more than 20 centuries. Nobody knew where it was.

And a little book put together by the people of Israel has shaken every empire that has ever stood in the whole of history. So it's a wonderful contrast between this great Assyrian city and the little book around which, uh, we are gathered this evening. The other thing that, uh, I think may be helpful for you to realize is that, uh, in, uh, in Jonah's mission to, uh, to Nineveh, he was given something very specific to do. He was given this message and the message was simply, uh, go and tell the people of Nineveh, uh, uh, yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown. So he went and did it exactly as he was told.

[11 : 33] And, uh, for some very peculiar reason and, uh, as a kind of amazing picture of the sovereign power of God, Jonah's message was heard. And, uh, the people of Nineveh believed God, the God of whom Jonah spoke.

And they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. And this was, uh, this was, uh, this was, I think, uh, a wonderful picture.

Because I think that there is in our hearts personally, in the, uh, hearts of the people of our culture and the people of our city.

And I don't say this in a condemnatory way. I just think that with compassion for people, most of us live with a tremendous need for repentance.

And so we go on in pretense. And we go on in, in, in, in lying. And we go on nurturing the illusions within which we live. And we can't come to the place where we can acknowledge that it's all wrong.

[13 : 03] That there's something basically and fundamentally wrong that needs to be corrected. And so the unfaithful husband goes on being unfaithful. And the alcoholic goes on being an alcoholic.

And the cheater goes on cheating. And the liar goes on lying. And then I ask you to take the further application of that to yourself, whatever it may be.

And I'll look after me. You look after you on that. Uh, because, uh, what we really need in our lives profoundly is a place of repentance.

A place where if we acknowledge and confess what has happened, we will be, as we suspect, almost certainly condemned.

And, uh, so we avoid it. Uh, we avoid coming to that place for fear of the condemnation which it would bring. And it's strange that God gave to the city of Nineveh this tremendous gift of

repentance.

[14:34] And even when the tidings, it says in verse 6, reached the king of Nineveh, 10.

And made proclamation and published it throughout the city, 10.

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[17:52] 20. 20. And I think the Christian church gets into a great deal of trouble because we don't like preaching the necessity of repentance.

We want to affirm one another. We want to be positive with one another. We want to see everything that's good in one another.

And I think one of the really deep needs of most of our hearts is not to be affirmed for the good things which we know altogether too well, but to be repentant of the things that have gone wrong in our lives and to be able to acknowledge before God that reality.

And when we repent, God's relationship to us, which all we can know is one of the just judgment of God, as it said in the lesson this morning, the soul that sinneth, it shall die, more than the just judgment of God, to find out something more profound about God's mercy and God's love and God's grace.

And that's, I think, what the third chapter is about. But just let me finish by telling you this.

[19:30] Two things I want to tell you. One is, remember that the very people whom this story roundly condemns are the people who have preserved this story throughout history as a testimony against them.

The people of God who are condemned by this story have kept this story and read it regularly.

And so we, as the people of God, need to look at it and recognize that in it we have the grounds of our own condemnation.

You see, what Jonah could not understand was why God would be concerned for a city like Nineveh that deserved nothing but the absolute condemnation of a just and holy God.

And as far as Jonah was concerned, it needed to be brought down on them with great power so that they would come to fear God profoundly.

[20:51] And that was what they wanted to see happen. And lots of religious people, and this is where I talk about religious people who know the Lord, they get into the position, we get into the position, I guess, where we want to see the judgment of God on the non-Christian, on the secular world, on the materialistic world, on the flagrantly self-sufficient world.

We want to see God's judgment come down and condemn them utterly. And what the people of Israel hadn't realized was that because God had chosen them not to be the instrument of God's condemnation of the other nations, but as a witness to the love of God for his people, the God who was their God too.

So that the Christian church needs to receive this message, and we as a congregation need to receive this message, in terms that God has not chosen us because he thinks we're very nice people, rather superior on the whole to most people.

That's not why he's done it. He's done it in order that we might bear witness to other people of the God who has condemned us in Christ and saved us through Christ, and whose purpose is not our death, but that we may turn in repentance and live.

So that's where the Jewish people fail in the ancient world, and that's where we fail in this world, because our responsibility, when the word of the Lord comes to us a second time, is to go and present the message that God has given to us as Moses, or as Jonah presented the message.

[23 : 20] To Nineveh, we think we can modify the message, or make it more acceptable, or make it more glamorous, or make it more attractive to people, but Jonah didn't have that option.

He had to go and give the message that God had given him, and our message may not be well-received by the world in which we live, but that doesn't give us the right or the authority to change it and to try and make it acceptable.

We're to do what we're told. We're to be obedient. And God will use that in his own grace and in his own sovereign purpose to accomplish his purpose among the people to whom in his name we bear witness to his love and his grace, as well as his just condemnation of sin in the world.

So, that's what it is to be a disobedient Christian. And Jonah illustrates what it is to be a disobedient Christian, not in chapter 3, alas, but in chapter 4.

And if you look at the first line of chapter 4, you'll see what I mean. But you have to wait till next week to find out what it's all about. Jonah, in chapter 4, it says, It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

[24 : 50] So, Jonah was displeased and angry because he had been the messenger of doom to the city of Nineveh, and he was telling them that the power of God would come upon them and crush them.

And God relented. And Jonah said, Why did I leave home?

Just as we so often say, Why has God commanded us to bear witness to the gospel when he could do it himself? But it is God's purpose.

When the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the word of the Lord comes to us. The message is given to Jonah. The message is given to us. Jonah was obedient.

We are to be obedient. And if like Jonah, we end up very angry and displeased. Because, you see, once you know that you're a Christian, and that your sins are forgiven, and that you have eternal life, something strange happens to you.

[26 : 05] You then become very anxious to see anybody else come under the condemnation of God. It's very strange. That's what happened to Jonah. And if that happens to you, then you, like Nineveh, need to seek a place of repentance so that as the word of the Lord comes to you a second time, or a third, or a fourth, or a fifth, and you are given a message, perhaps too simple for your sophisticated person, you are to deliver that message, and you are to trust the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, who apply that message to people's hearts.

And that's what Jonah found it difficult to do for reasons that you'll hear about next week. Amen. Amen. Amen.