

Mission to Nineveh

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to turn this evening then to that chapter that we read, Jonah chapter 3, page 936.

And verse 4, Jonah began to go through the city, into the city, going a day's journey, and he called out, yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And the people of Nineveh believed God.

They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. I wonder if I was to ask you this evening to describe to me the book of Jonah or the story of Jonah in one word.

What would that word be? I didn't say to tell me the story of Jonah because we all know the story off by heart. But when we summarize something, it's a lot more difficult than actually telling the story in detail.

I didn't say one sentence. I said one word. What would that word be? I suppose for many of the younger people, the word would be whale. And you'd be quite right.

[1 : 2 5] Jonah was swallowed by a whale and survived for three days and for three nights inside the stomach of the whale. We all know the story. And so I suppose for the young people, the word whale would describe the story for us.

But to me, that word is not good enough. Because the greatest thing about the story of Jonah is not the whale or his survival in the stomach of a whale for three days and three nights.

The greatest thing for me is the word mission. Because that is what God sent Jonah on. And that was the order that God gave to Jonah.

And that was the very thing that was so outrageous to him and so repulsive to him that instead of listening to the command that God gave him, he decided to do the very opposite and to flee and to run in the opposite direction.

Instead of going to Nineveh, which was east, he went to Joppa, which is west. He went the exact opposite and did exactly the opposite of what God told him to do.

[2 : 3 6] And that was because for him, the mission that God sent him on was outrageous as far as he was concerned. First of all, it was a dangerous mission.

Nineveh was an awesome city. It wasn't some kind of little hamlet somewhere out in the middle of nowhere. It was hugely populated with one to two million people living in it.

It was the capital of Assyria, which was a powerful nation near to Israel at that time. It was originally built by Cush. If you want to know the history of the place, you have to go back to Genesis chapter 10 and verse 11.

It apparently took 1.4 million men eight years to build this city. It has a circumference of 60 miles.

It had a circumference of 60 miles. It had walls which were 100 feet high. And the walls were so broad that three chariots could run alongside each other on the top of these walls.

[3 : 45] Now, you imagine 100 feet high. That is truly quite awesome. It had 1,500 towers along these walls. Each one of these towers was 200 feet high.

No wonder God calls it that great city. And when he tells us at the end of chapter 4 that there were 120,000 persons, God's saying, who do not know their right hand from their left, that's not the population of the city.

That was the children of the city. After all, it's a child that doesn't know his right hand from his left, at least a young child. That's what that figure of 120,000 means.

It wasn't the population of the city. The population of the city was 1 to 2 million. But it was more than that. Because these were ruthless people. They were fierce people.

They were enemies of Israel. And they would have killed Jonah as soon as look at him. Especially when you come to remember that Assyria was one of the enemies of Israel. And when you were an enemy, that meant you really were an enemy.

[4 : 53] And so that, naturally, if he had walked in, as soon as he had walked in that gate, then the chances are that he would be killed or put to death.

But there's more to it than that. Because it was unheard of for an Israelite prophet whose job it was to speak to the Israelites on behalf of God, to be sent outside the borders of Israel to speak to a nation that weren't just not Israelites, but they were enemies of Israel.

Such a thing was completely unique. It was unheard of before. Never before in the whole of the history of God's covenant with his people did he tell any prophet to go outside of their borders to an enemy area to preach to them what God was going to do to them.

And thirdly, it was outrageous in its implication because implicit in the message of God that God told Jonah to bring to the people of Nineveh was a message of mercy.

Now, how did he work that one out? Well, he worked that one out. We'll come to that a little bit further on. God told them to cry against them. And the message that he took to them was, In 40 days, you will be overthrown.

[6 : 10] But Jonah wasn't, he wasn't daft. He knew that there had to be an ultimate reason why he was being sent with a message like that.

And he knew also the nature of God was to forgive and to cleanse us from sin and to put away our sin and to set people free from sin.

So he knew that behind this message, which seemingly sounded like a message of judgment, 40 days, he knew that if the people repented, that God was likely to forgive them and to save them from the judgment that they so deserved because he knew God.

And he knew that that's what God did for Israel. And he knew that the very reason that he was being sent there. So for him, the prospect of these, the scum of the earth as far as he was concerned, the enemies of Israel, people who were dogs, people who weren't worth anything, why should they be forgiven?

Why should God have anything to say to them? After all, anything God had said in the past, he said to his people who were Israel. They were his covenant people going all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[7 : 24] Why now would he send anyone to, out of Israel to speak to the Ninevites? And that is because God is a gracious God.

Even the God of the Old Testament, that very often people criticize as being ruthless, God is always gracious and always has been. And the Old Testament, although it contains many incidences of people being judged and put to death, it is about the God who is gracious and the God who loves to save.

I take no pleasure, says God, in the death of the wicked. So for these reasons, he disobeyed and he ran from God. And we all know the story of how when he ran from God, he went on a ship that was going to Tarshish.

He boarded the ship and there arose a great storm and the men, the sailors, had to throw him overboard when he told them that the only way that the storm would ever abate is if he was to be thrown into the water.

They did so. Immediately the storm abated. He sank into the sea and he was swallowed by either a whale or a great fish. It doesn't really matter. We don't know for sure.

[8 : 33] And there he prayed to God inside the stomach of this great fish. God heard his prayer and took him to the shore again and the fish spat him out, ready to begin again.

And this time he listened to the voice of God. Now I'm not going to spend any time at all this evening arguing about the truthfulness of this story. For some people it's a myth.

For some people they think it's a ridiculous thing to believe that it happened literally. They think it has all the stuff of a legend and therefore that's the way we should believe it. We should never take it too seriously but it's a story rather that just tells us it's got a greater meaning behind the story and that is what we should concentrate on.

What is behind the story? The problem I have with people who talk like that are where do you draw the line between what you believe and what you don't believe in the Bible? Where do you draw the line?

Because in a sense everything that's strange and there are loads of strange things in the Bible. Miraculous things. Unnatural supernatural things that take place. Old Testament, New Testament.

[9 : 41] So whether it's the body of a man being thrown into a grave and on top of the bones of Elisha and when the body of the man touched the bones of Elisha he came back to life again or whether it's in the New Testament Paul placing a handkerchief on someone or rather someone bringing a handkerchief to Paul and as soon as he touched the handkerchief that person was ill all of these accounts are supernatural.

Which ones do you believe and which ones do you not believe? As people say well this is ridiculous. All miracles are ridiculous if you want to put it that way. All miracles are foolish.

They go against all the norms of nature of the world's nature. That's what makes them miracles. They wouldn't be miracles if they weren't supernatural. So because we happen to or some of us happen to judge that something is supernatural or something is foolish doesn't mean that it didn't happen just because we happen to think that it's ridiculous.

That's simply the conclusion that you have come to. But in so doing what you're doing is you're disbelieving or choosing to disbelieve part of the Bible.

Well where do you draw the line between what you do believe and what you don't believe? To me it is given as a historical account. Furthermore we find another reference to Jonah way back in 2nd Kings.

[11 : 06] He was a real person. He was a real prophet. Thirdly Jesus referred to Jonah for as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights so the son of man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.

Now to me if the man was a historical person and if Jesus referred to him in a historical way then there is no reason why I can't believe this evening that this happened in its entirety.

God nothing is impossible with God and what it shows to me is the utter determination of God to carry out the mission that he sent Jonah on. And he was not going to take no for an answer because the mission was too important.

God had pity on the people of Nineveh and they were so important to him that the refusal and the determination of his prophet to run away from him was not going to stop him.

And here God was going to make an example of this disobedient prophet to pull him back to restore him into obedience again so that we could come back thousands of years later and we can recognize the grace of God not only in saving the Ninevites from their sins but in restoring this disobedient wayward prophet because how many times have we been disobedient in God's service?

[12 : 22] I have and I'm sure you have also but we've come back to Jonah and to Peter and to David all of whom were wayward men of God and women of God and we can see how God restored them back into fellowship with himself because he had a work for them to do.

That's a great encouragement to me. But it's also a great warning as to how foolish it is to disregard what God is telling us to do. It brought nothing but misery to Jonah to do so and if you and I disregard what God is telling us to do tonight it will bring nothing but misery to us.

No matter how we try to get away from our responsibilities and the commands that God gives us in his word if we love the Lord tonight there is nothing that is going to give us peace with God.

Jonah the moment he took that step in the wrong direction he took a step away from peace with God and it wasn't until he was brought back and you can only imagine the pain and the misery it was three days and three nights in a horrible dreadful dark place who knows what he suffered the pain and the misery that he suffered and yet that was God's way of bringing him back.

So just in case any of us are fighting against God tonight and his commands his story is a warning to us. It's a warning that is given by God in his grace so that we will not do the same thing or something similar from what Jonah did.

[13 : 53] Let's look very briefly at this the whole theme of mission and the fact that God sent Jonah and was so determined to do so in order to save and to rescue the people of Nineveh.

And I want us to see tonight that there's a parallel in the story between what God was doing here and what God continues to do in the New Testament in sending out his disciples and saying to them go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.

That's the mission of the church that each one of us if we follow the Lord are involved in in some respect or another. There's a parallel behind it although the circumstances are very different there's a parallel between what God says to Jonah in going to Nineveh and what he said to his disciples go into all the world.

It reminds us first of all that we are accountable to God. This was the message that Jonah was to bring to the people of Nineveh. Go to Nineveh and cry against it.

Against it. Now this was not Jonah pointing the finger. So many people they accuse Christians of pointing the finger and judging them. Well maybe some Christians do that and if they do they're wrong.

[15 : 05] But the real issue here is not whether Christians point the finger at you it's whether God points his finger at you. That's really what the problem is. And the problem is that whatever argument you might have you stand before God and you're accountable.

You're not accountable to anyone else in the way you're accountable to God ultimately for everything that you do for the life that you live. And the bottom line is that you are you stand before God tonight the Bible tells us that one day we will stand before him and we will be accountable.

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. That's the first thing that the message tells us. But the message also as I said before it implies God's forgiveness because Jonah would never have been sent if it hadn't been possible for these people to forgive.

But there's also an incentive behind this mission behind God's command and the incentive was what we might call the glory of God displayed in the lives of repentant people.

How marvelous is it to walk through a city of one to two million people and to see them all pray.

[16 : 22] How unusual that would be. How amazing that would be. And yet that is exactly what this story is all about. Imagine that happened in Glasgow tonight.

Imagine that instead of tonight all these people queuing up to go to the cinema or queuing up to go to nightclubs and restaurants they were all queuing up to go to church. It's unbelievable isn't it?

It really is beyond our imagination because I guess we've become so accustomed to the failure of the gospel of what we think is the failure of the gospel that we've just learned to live with the world as it is.

Which is that the hosts of people go to one thing while a few people go to another. Imagine it was the other way around. Do you believe that God could do that tonight?

I believe he could. And this is an example of his marvelous power. There is no way if you had asked somebody in those days do you believe that the people of Nineveh will in one moment of time all fall down and clothe themselves with sackcloth and cry out to the Lord for forgiveness they would have said you're off your head.

[17 : 32] There's the last thing that could ever possibly happen and if you knew anything about the Ninevites you knew that that was an impossibility and yet that's exactly what happened. How did it happen?

It happened by the power of God. It didn't happen because God stood or made himself visible to them. It happened by the word of God and by the Holy Spirit taking the message that Jonah brought to them and by driving it home into their hearts.

There is nothing as powerful as God's word. It may be refused by the masses tonight but when God's spirit takes it and he makes it effective in people's lives then nothing is impossible with God.

How did this it's quite quite marvelous when you even go into this by asking how did this happen?

It happened as I said by Jonah and I'm quite sure he said more than that but his essential message the main point of his message was as he went through Nineveh he said yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

[18 : 47] Now let's stop there for a few moments time and just think about that. That was the message. Now first of all it's a miracle. The first miracle is that he wasn't put to death right away because he was an enemy of Nineveh.

They could easily have cut his head off as soon as he stepped over the threshold but they didn't. They listened to him. But let me ask you this supposing someone was to come to Stornoway tonight and said we have a month before Stornoway will be destroyed and everyone in Stornoway will be killed.

That's the message. Supposing someone came here and supposing there was reason to believe it. What would you choose to do tonight if you only had 30 days to live?

It's exactly the problem. It's exactly the question that everyone in the Ninevites faced from the king on the throne down to the baby on the cradle. What would you do if you had 30 to 40 days in this case?

One month you've got to live. What would you do? I reckon that for the most part people would try and run away. That they would spend the 30 days and that they would load their oxes and their carts and their horses and their camels or whatever else they had and they would decide to choose what to save in their households and try and run away as quickly as possible.

[20 : 12] That's the first thing that we would do isn't it? Or you might despair. you might go and lock yourself away in your bedroom and just wait and just quake in fear waiting for the inevitable to happen.

Or some others might make sure well if I've only got 30 days to live I've only got a month to live then I'm going to make sure that it's the best month in my whole life I'm going to spare myself nothing.

I'm going to make sure that I enjoy everything that I dreamed about. Any money I've got in the bank I'm going to make sure I spend it on myself. Whatever I wish in this life I'm going to do what I've always wanted to live to make sure.

The marvelous thing is this that despite the fact that these people could have done all of these three things that's not what they did. They listened to the voice of God and they repented.

Now to me that is where the miracle lies. It's the last thing I would expect them to do and yet that's exactly what happened and that is what happens with the gospel.

[21 : 20] The gospel defies what we expect and when God speaks to a person that person there is a power and inward inescapable power that turns that person around and that constrains him to listen.

It's not a power that I can generate. It's not a power that I can prove. I can't prove to you tonight that God even exists. You know it's become fashionable in the last few years to be an atheist and even this week that Professor Stephen Hawking has written another book in which sadly he comes to the conclusion that as far as he's concerned that God is redundant.

he left the question open before in his book that he published 20 years ago which was one of the classic science books of all time and he left the question open. That was a much wiser thing to do than what he's done now which is to conclude that there is no God.

We don't need him anymore and because he feels that we don't need him then it beggars belief to me how a man in his condition can come to the conclusion that he has no need of God.

I find that so sad. So it's become fashionable to be an atheist because lots of people have got onto the bandwagon as you might expect of believing that science has now disproved the need for God.

[22 : 48] It has done away with the need for God and it hasn't done anything of the kind. There's been no new discovery made. There's simply just different conclusions. Well these conclusions were come to a long time ago.

There's nothing new about these statements at all. But the fact tonight is that I can't prove to you that there is a God by science.

Science doesn't prove either that there is or there isn't. But the fact that when God speaks to someone there is an inescapable power in that voice.

And he speaks through the message of the gospel and he speaks through his word. and he speaks supremely through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the New Testament Jonah who was sent by God to die on the cross and to give his life for people who need God.

It's really incredible isn't it how this king even the king in all his might here is a king who stopped at nothing. He didn't get to be king just by being a wimp.

[23 : 57] he had to prove himself on many occasions by being cruel and ruthless. And here is a man who has the power to do away with anyone he wants to do away with.

He has ultimate authority in his kingdom and here we see him as he listens to this lone prophet sent from Israel and there's tears in his eyes.

He becomes a broken man. Everything he has ever done every awful dark shameful thing that he has ever done every act of deceit every lie every lustful thought every innocent person he has put to death everything he has done all of a sudden comes flooding into his heart and he sees himself no longer as the king over the city but as a lone person standing standing before his creator to whom he is accountable.

See that's what happens when the gospel gets to you. You don't see yourself any longer in terms of your reputation in this world or what other people think of you or even what you've always thought about yourself but you see yourself for the first time in terms of the way God sees you.

You see that you're standing before God alone to whom you must give an account. It's an awful thing says the apostle to stand before the living God.

[25 : 36] And that's where we're all at tonight. Every one of us despite all our arguments and our objections and our reasoning process the bottom line is this that we were created in the image of God and we stand accountable to him this evening.

And you can spend your whole life fighting and struggling and trying to escape that fact by every known method and means the fact is that God is and that we stand before him tonight.

But that still doesn't answer the question as to why these people repented. We've already talked about three options that might have been open to them. They could have despaired, they could have ran, they could have made sure that the last 40 days of their lives were the best 40 days they could ever have by doing whatever they wanted.

But they chose not to do that. Why? Well, I'll tell you why. There was one reason that made all the difference between them despairing and repenting.

And that was Jonah himself. And here's the question. If God is truly going to destroy this city and if we have no hope in all the world, 40 days, if these truly are the last 40 days we're going to live in this world, why did God send Jonah to tell us this?

[27 : 07] Could it be that this is a warning from God and that if we turn to him and seek him with all our heart, then he will have mercy upon us.

That was the way they worked out the mercy of God. And that was how they came to repent. And that was how they came to be saved. Because they saw through the message that Jonah brought them.

They saw behind the message that there could not possibly be any other reason to send Jonah. After all, if God wanted to destroy them, he could do it in a moment.

Why give them 40 days? If they were deserving of his wrath, then God had the authority and the power to just wipe them out there and then. In whatever way he wanted to do so.

Why give them this opportunity? It must be that there's an opportunity to turn away from all that is offensive to God and to depend and to cling to his mercy.

[28 : 12] And that was faith. That was where, that was the moment in which the lights went on. For the first time ever, where they left, they turned away from everything that they knew was evil and they cried to the Lord.

And it's in that moment that you and I cry to the Lord that we come to faith in his mercy and in his grace. And that was what really got to Jonah more than anything else when he saw all those people.

You know, he sat down after he preached to them. He sat down outside the city and he folded his arms and he waited to see what God was going to do. Oh, how he hoped that God was going to rain fire and brimstone down on that city because he hated.

Imagine, can you imagine Jonah? He really, you know, he really was a rascal. And I say that knowing that at heart I am a rascal.

Because he just, even at that point, he didn't get it. He complained he had the gall after God saved him from dying in the fish's belly.

[29 : 28] And after being confronted with his own disobedience, that's what he deserved. He was the one who deserved God's wrath. And yet, even after all of that experiencing God's mercy and his grace, he has the gall to sit down and wait and long for the city of Nineveh to be destroyed.

Even as followers of Jesus, we have so much to learn. And Jonah had so much to learn. And God takes that rascal and he reasons with him.

And he persuades him that he's wrong in his thinking. And once again, you see God's patience with his own people, just the same patience as he's had with me and he's had with you on so many occasions.

When we've rebelled against him and when we've constantly and regularly done the same thing over and over again and things that we know that are wrong, he reasons with us in the gospel, in the Bible, because he's gracious and his grace restores and restores and restores.

And that's what he's doing here to Jonah, restoring him to a right relationship with God once again. God's holy.

[30 : 52] So they turned from their evil ways and they repented and God did exactly the opposite to what Jonah wanted them to do. He wanted him to do.

He had mercy upon the people of Nineveh. And what this shows me more than anything else is a New Testament picture of the gospel.

in someone being sent to preach, to share with those who have never heard of the living and the true God. And it once again reminds me of the great work that you and I have to do or have to be involved in, in going to all the world, not literally going, but supporting and praying for and sending out people into all the world to preach and to share and to tell people of the good news that God is merciful and that God loves to save and that he has demonstrated his mercy to us in sending Jesus Christ.

I believe that tonight Jonah was a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ himself, not in his disobedience. Jesus Christ indeed was the very opposite to Jonah.

When God said to his own son, go into that dark, cruel, sinful world, you might expect that if anyone had a right to do the opposite, Jesus might have.

[32 : 23] Paul tells us he thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself willingly of no reputation.

And he came into this world being found in the likeness of a man. He humbled himself and became obedient. Christ was the very opposite of Jonah.

And yet, at the same time, Christ is similar to Jonah. Jonah, he tells us that himself. For as Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, so shall the Son of Man be in the belly of the earth, three in the heart of the earth, three days and three nights.

What did he mean by that? It meant his resurrection, his burial and his resurrection. He was talking about his death. Now, how was the death of Jesus, similar to Jonah being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights?

In that, this was God's way of bringing his message to and his salvation to the people of Nineveh, who were the lost world. And God's determination meant that the very Son of God himself would be in the heart of the earth.

[33 : 36] And if that's what it took, if it took the death of his Son, the painful death of his Son, and the burial of his Son for three days and three nights, only to rise again, then so be it.

If that's what it takes to save you and I, God was prepared to do that. Christ was prepared to do that. With all the pain and the suffering and the misery, the death itself, in order to bring and to bring a people to himself like you and I.

People who were like the Ninevites, completely undeserving of his grace. And that's how Jonah relates, I believe, with the gospel tonight.

And that's how he relates to you and to me. In that, what are we doing? It asks us the question, how have we responded to God's command?

If you're a Christian tonight, is God telling you to do something? Have you been convicted by his word as you've read it? Have you, perhaps there's someone here tonight and you have that growing conviction that God is calling you to a special, to a particular work that he wants you to do.

[34 : 47] And the easiest thing in the world, perhaps it's a work that makes you terrified. Perhaps it's the very last thing that you, at this moment in time, want to do. It takes you completely out of your comfort zone, just the same way as it does, as it did to Jonah.

Perhaps you've already discovered the misery of what it means to disobey God as a Christian. Well, all of that misery is so that God can restore you and to set your feet upon the rock again and to establish your way.

God is concerned to start again, that we should start again. But perhaps tonight you're more like the people of Nineveh and you need to hear the message of the gospel in the first place.

Well, all I can say is what I've said before, that we listen to the man that God has sent into the world with the same mission, to the Lord Jesus Christ, that we listen to him, that we come to him and that we trust in him.

He alone is God's way of our salvation. His death alone is God's forgiveness for our sin. His resurrection is God's pledge to us that he that believes in me will not perish, though he were dead, yet shall he live.

[36 : 11] Have you discovered that truth yet in your own heart? Well, if not, ask him to show you the truth of his message, the truth of God and Jesus Christ having come into the world to seek and to save those who were lost.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, once again, we ask that you will follow with your blessing all that is being said and all that is being preached in your name.

We give thanks, Lord, for the privilege of being able to share together your word. And we pray that your spirit will awaken your truth within each one of us in his name. Amen.