

## Jonah #3

*Then 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, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'*

Jonah 3:1-4

In our last two talks we have seen how the prophet Jonah was told by God to preach against the Assyrian city of Nineveh.

And how Jonah disobeyed God and got on a ship travelling over 2,000 miles in the opposite direction.

We saw how the only disobedient person on the boat was one of God's prophets and how the pagans on the boat turned out to be more aware of Israel's God than Jonah was.

And we saw how, even when God miraculously rescues Jonah from drowning, Jonah's attitude continues to be self-absorbed and self-righteous.

And we looked at how we need to be conscious that we too can slip into being self-absorbed and self-righteous, especially when we believe we are living lives that are obedient to God.

At the end of the last session, we saw God commanding the fish that had swallowed Jonah to vomit him back onto the land of Israel.

Jonah probably returned to Gath-hepher, his home town. We are not told how people reacted to his fish story, if indeed he decided to tell anyone about it. Can you imagine him trying to explain to his wife where he'd been for the last couple of weeks?

*Then 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 3:1-2

God repeats his command for Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim God’s message to them.

Not surprisingly, this time Jonah obeys, and makes the 600 mile journey 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, ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’*

Jonah 3:3b-4

And once there, Jonah obediently preaches the message God has given him, the summary of which is... ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’

As I mentioned in an earlier talk, whatever we may think of Jonah’s personality, this was a very brave (some would say foolhardy) thing to do. The Assyrians were no friends of the Jews, or of the Jews’ God, and walking around telling them that their city was about to be overthrown was asking for trouble.

*The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*

Jonah 3:5

But, almost certainly to Jonah’s astonishment, God’s message persuades the Ninevites, and they begin a communal demonstration of repentance, that includes fasting and wearing rough, uncomfortable clothing, which was a culturally typical way of demonstrating remorse for your actions.

As with Jonah being swallowed by a fish, there are many who have expressed disbelief that something like this could have happened. But, unlike the fish swallowing event, we do have numerous historical

records of huge numbers of people responding to a single human being speaking God's message.

There is, of course, Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost mentioned in the second chapter of Acts, where about 3,000 people accepted Jesus as Lord.

And these kinds of events have continued throughout history.

In 1904, a Welsh preacher called Evan Roberts led a revival that resulted in 100,000 people becoming Christians in just four months. It was such a big deal that the number of conversions was reported daily in Wales' national newspaper.

And not long after that, there was the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, California, with thousands of people giving their lives to Jesus, and which is seen as the beginning of what we now know as the Pentecostal church, which continues to be the fastest growing denomination in the world, with over 280 million members.

Ultimately, like the fish that swallowed Jonah, with God all things are possible. And there is plenty of evidence that God has worked in extraordinary ways throughout history.

And so back to the story...

*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.*

Jonah 3:6

The king hears about Jonah's message, and he responds in a similar way to the city's population.

*This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his 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 with 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 so that we will not perish.'*

Jonah 3:7-9

Wow. Can you imagine if Vladimir Putin gave an announcement like this? Or Kier Starmer? Or Donald Trump?

The Assyrians were infamous for their love of violence. If you take a trip to the British Museum you can view engravings that depict a wide range of cruelties, most of which aren't suitable to talk about in a church service, but which included mutilations, slowly flaying people to death and impalement.

And yet here is an Assyrian king calling the entire city of Nineveh to repent, change their ways and plead with the Jewish God to suspend his judgment of the city. Even the animals participate!

And it would appear that their repentance was genuine...

*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.*

Jonah 3:10

Here is one of many Bible instances of God 'relenting' from doing what he said he was going to do. And it is good to remind ourselves once again that our God is not a God who delights in beating people up.

He created humans in his image, to live in relationship with him. He created us to enjoy and delight in the world he created for us to live in. The rules he gave us to follow were given to make sure we thrived.

But humans chose (and continue to choose) not to live in relationship with God. As the Book of Jonah shows, even God's prophets don't always live in relationship with him.

And even people who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, don't always choose to live in relationship with him.

The God portrayed in the Old Testament is the same God we see in the New Testament. Jesus was the perfect image of God, in human form. And God's very nature is love.

He hates sin in the same way we hate cancer. Because it corrupts the good things he wants for us. But God's nature is always towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

As Nehemiah prayed, contrasting Israel's unfaithfulness with God's faithfulness...

*They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. **But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.** Therefore you did not desert them.*

Nehemiah 9:17

And the prophet Micah wrote...

*Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance?  
You do not stay angry for ever but **delight to show mercy.***

Micah 7:18

As finite humans, we're never going to fully understand how God can be completely in control of things while allowing us to freely decide whether we choose his ways or not.

So when we see God say he is going to pronounce judgement on a person or place, and then decides not to go ahead with it, we are not seeing a God who can't make up his mind, we are looking at a God who would much rather forgive than punish.

This tension is seen in Jeremiah 18, where God declares...

*If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.*

Jeremiah 18:7-8

This is what we have seen happen at Nineveh.

Jonah preached that in 40 days Nineveh would be overthrown.

But when Nineveh repents, God relents.

However, we must never take God's forgiveness for granted. When God warns of his judgment, we must take it very seriously. And there are times in the Bible when God doesn't relent, when he withdraws his protection from a rebellious person, community or nation to show what life is like without it.

But the overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that the God of Israel is a God who 'delights to show mercy.'

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So, Nineveh is saved. However, unlike the earlier description of the sailors

who are said to have greatly feared the LORD, offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him, there is no mention made of the Ninevites' response to God withdrawing his judgment on them.

It is probable that the Ninevites' repentance was short-lived.

Unlike the sailors, they were warned before it happened. They did not see God's power unleashed. Once the threat was over, they probably drifted back to their old ways and gods.

The biblical history of Israel is a sad cycle of God reaching out to help and save them, followed by Israel drifting away from him, getting in trouble, and begging him to help and save them.

And this cycle has been repeated throughout history. Not just with Israel, but with the Christian Church.

I spoke earlier about the 1904 Welsh revival. While it saw over 100,000 people becoming Christians, it was followed by a rapid decline in church attendance. Many put this down to poor leadership, and to people being more interested in 'signs and wonders' than in growing into a mature Bible-based faith.

And let's not kid ourselves that we are not prone to the same behaviour.

When we get in trouble, often self-caused, we pray to God for help, making all kinds of promises to be better people. And God answers our prayers. And we are thankful, for a while. And then we forget our promises and go on with our lives as if nothing had happened, until we get ourselves in trouble again, when we repeat the process.

Not long after Jonah visited Nineveh, the prophet Nahum predicted the total destruction of Nineveh due to its cruelty, wickedness and pride.

This time Nineveh did not repent. And God did not relent.

And a few decades later, this came to pass when a coalition of Babylonians, Medes and Scythians, following a 3-month siege, broke through the walls and burned the city to the ground.

Nineveh was never again a major city, and today its ruins are an archaeological site in modern-day Iraq.

And so back to Jonah.

He has finally done what God told him to. And Nineveh has repented of their evil ways. Jonah has learned his lesson.

The end.

But no, there's one more chapter to explore. And we'll do that in a month's time, when we'll see how Jonah reacts to God's grace and mercy toward Nineveh.