

Man repents; God relents.
Theme: God is determined to save sinners.
Jonah 3:1-10

I wonder if you've ever heard of the man named William Carey? Maybe you haven't, that's fine. William Carey was a shoe-maker in England in the late 1700s. When he was a young man he felt God calling him to preach the gospel, and in particular he had a desire to preach to people who had never heard of Christ before. Of course, he wasn't the first to do this. The Apostle Paul was doing this in the 1st C. But for William Carey there were a number of pastors within his circles in England who thought he was actually trying to interfere with God's work. There was even one time at a pastor's meeting when Carey raised the topic of going to the heathens to preach the good news about Jesus. Well, an old minister there spoke up and said, "Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your help or mine!"

William Carey was not steered off course by this and he ended up going to India as a missionary. And after 7 years of working in India, on the banks of the Hooghly River, in front of a large crowd of Hindus, Muslims, and Europeans, Krishna Pal was baptized, on Dec the 28th, 1800, confessing that Christ had given his life for sinners and that he had personally accepted this truth by faith. Krishna Pal was the first convert in India. Just over 20 years later there had been over 1,400 converts.

What the old minister who tried to rebuke Carey didn't understand was that God does purpose to save sinners, and he generally does so by sending his people, to declare his message, so that sinners might repent and believe.

This is the theme of the story that is before us today. God purposes to send his messenger, with his message, to those who are under judgment. And he does this so that they might have an opportunity to repent, to believe, and to be saved.

We will look at this story in 3 parts:

1. Jonah preaches
2. Nineveh repents
3. God relents

1. Jonah preaches

So we begin with the first heading: Jonah preaches.

Notice with me how chapter 3 opens,

Vs 1. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."

Maybe you know how the book of Jonah began in ch. 1:1-2, you can flip there if you have your Bible or just listen, (and if you're not familiar with Jonah he was a prophet from the nation of Israel, God's people, around the mid-late 8th C. B.C.) "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.'"

This is Deja Vu isn't it? There are some minor differences of course, but for all intents and purposes we are right back at the beginning. Jonah is again told to go to Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, and to declare God's message to the Ninevites.

What has happened between chapter 1 and 3? Well in chapter 1, after God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah disobeyed God and headed in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh. So, he boarded a ship heading for Tarshish.

But in 1:4 you can read that God, who is both Maker and Master of all creation, sent a great windstorm on the sea and chased after his rebellious prophet, until at last Jonah was cast into the sea and the storm stopped. But even then, when Jonah was sinking bellow the waves, as good as dead, God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah and after 3 days and 3 nights to spit Jonah up on dry land again. And now here we are, at the beginning of chapter 3, almost exactly where we left off, and God's word comes to Jonah a second time.

We might notice two things here. First, we could mention God's determination to send word to the pagan city of Nineveh. God will not be thwarted. He is determined to accomplish his purposes of salvation. And so, he brings Jonah right back to square one and recommissions him to go to preach to Nineveh.

And secondly, brothers and sisters in Christ, this should be a great comfort to us. Have you ever failed in preaching the gospel to others? Have you missed opportunities to tell others about Jesus Christ, to warn them of the judgment to come, but also of how God offers salvation and eternal life through Christ? Have you ever failed in this? I have. Probably most of us have. And have you failed to live the gospel out in front of others, to preach Christ through your actions? God's word comes to Jonah a second time, even though he had sinned and failed in his mission. God so often is patient with his people.

But next, Jonah still has a mission to do. God doesn't just say, "Well alright Jonah, you win, guess I'll send someone else." No Jonah was saved by God and now he has work to do. And God sends him to the great city of Nineveh. We are told in verse 3 that the city was *an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent*. It's not entirely clear what this means. By ancient standards a good day's march was roughly 35 kilometers. And did you know you could march from Pearson Airport to the East end of Scarborough in a day and a half. And Nineveh was definitely not bigger than the GTA. In fact, archeology

shows the city was probably 11-13 kl in circumference. The expression of a three-day journey might refer to the amount of time you should expect for a proper visit to Nineveh. So, for example, if I'm a diplomat or an emissary and I go to visit the great Nineveh I should expect to spend no less than 3 days there.

What we can say very clearly is Nineveh didn't have a rival. There was no bigger-badder city than Nineveh, with all its pomp and power. Who could contend with her? Assyria, the nation known for its ruthless war tactics. Armies who raped and pillaged, soldiers who dashed babies against rocks and hung the enemy skulls in the streets. But it's to this great city, to this wicked city, that God sends Jonah to proclaim God's message. And Jonah, who himself has just been rescued from the clutches of death by God's mercy, obeys God and goes. And in v. 4 we read, *4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

Picture it, here's Jonah, far from home, in the heart of this Sodom-like city, this great city, but this city whose wickedness has not gone unnoticed by God. Jonah's message is remarkably brief. But it is a word that comes from the God himself. Forty days, says Jonah, and you, Nineveh, will come under God's judgment. Will Nineveh turn over their hearts? Or will they stay in their wickedness and be overturned by God's judgment?

The Jews would have also remembered this word for "overthrow" from the story found in Genesis 19 where God "overthrew" the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God reigned down brimstone on these two cities and they were burned up because of their wickedness.

God's word through Jonah is serious isn't it? It's a message of judgment for sin. We might be tempted to say, "Well Nineveh was pretty bad, they should be destroyed." And you're right. But the Bible teaches that everyone has sinned against God. Neither you nor I are any better than these people here. But the amazing thing is that God sends word to them, he warns them.

Beloved, do you have a functional understanding of God's judgment? God didn't merely send Jesus Christ to be a good example. He is of course our chief example. But Christ came to pay for our sin and set us free from God's wrath against sin. This is both the necessity of the cross and the power of the resurrection message. God must judge sin. His character demands it. And for anyone who is not a child of God, they will stand before Christ on the great day of judgment and be sentenced to eternal punishment. And this is why it so urgent to know that your sins are forgiven in Christ. This is of course highly unpopular today. But it's what we find in Scripture. Beloved, when you speak of the gospel with others, does your message contain elements of this?

This is the message God wanted Nineveh to hear, and if you are not a child of God it's also the message he wants you to hear it. The question is, what are you going to do about it?

This brings us to our second heading.

God was determined to send his message to sinners, and he did so through Jonah, and now the question is, how will they respond?

2. Nineveh repents.

If you'll look with me in our text at verse 5 it says this,

5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

The response is instantaneous. The inhabitants of the metropolitan Nineveh are shook by God's message of judgment preached by Jonah. We don't know if it was a week, or a day, but the narrator gives us the sense that there was not a moment to lose. And from the greatest of them to the least they believe and repent.

Just as Abram in Gen 15:6 believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness so the Ninevites believe in God. (cf. Ex. 14.31). In Genesis 15 we are told that God's word comes to Abram and God tells him, "Abram, you're going to have an heir, and not just an heir, but your descendants are going to be as many as the stars for number." Abram didn't see the fulfillment of this in his day, Yet he believed at the word of God. Nineveh doesn't wait around to see if God will make good on his word, the people simply believe. They believe in God, God is the object of their faith. This is biblical faith. It is taking God at his word. Faith is not a blind leap in the dark. It's not a "hoping for the best." It is the conviction of things which are not seen. It is coming face to face with God's word and being convicted that it is true.

But what does faith require? Faith requires action. These people here call a fast and put on sackcloth. These were common ways in the ancient world of showing remorse, grief, humility. In spiritual senses they are "the hallmarks of true repentance." Fasting was a denial of the necessities of life. Generally, in Scripture, fasting was refraining from food or drink in order to pray to God And that's what we see here also. And sackcloth was "a thick coarse cloth, normally made from goat's hair [or camel's hair, and it was known to be itchy]; to wear it symbolized the rejection of earthly comforts and pleasures." (T.D. Alexander) It might be something like wearing clothes made out of straight Velcro. This is the opposite of your silk shirt.

The Ninevites unanimously, from the greatest of them to the least, humble themselves—from nobles down to pauper. Just imagine today if, from Doug Ford to Dave the factory worker, people across this city just dropped what they were doing and examined their spiritual status before God in heaven.

Well, we get to v. 6 and it says this,

6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.

God's message reaches the ears of the king of Nineveh. And unlike Jonah in chapter 1 who tried to run from God's word, the king gets up from his throne, takes off his royal robes, and sits in ashes. The symmetry here is striking. The king exchanges his garments of authority for the sackcloth of frailty, and he changes his throne of power for ashes of humility. Try to imagine this, the king of the greatest city at that time faces his Maker, and realizes he's no better than dust and ashes.

7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles [Jonah 3:7 Lit. great ones], saying,

Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

The king and his cabinet make a "decree" in the city. And the word can have a figurative meaning of "a judgment or discernment." The play on words is really quite striking, the king and all his officials have heard that God's judgment is coming, and according to their better "judgment," they discern that they must repent and turn from sin!

The people don't say, "Well hang on, can't this business wait? I just got married, I have a family; I just got this business contract, I have too much to do; I'll think about this God business later on." A lot of people in our culture today have this attitude. But Nineveh had their priorities right. And so, the people, the beasts, the herds and flocks are all put on hold. We might say it this way, the worker and the work-ox. This is like: RBC is closed; the tower cranes and the excavators are shut down; Loblaw's is locked up until we get sorted out our standing before God!

Verse 8 is so crucial. We might say, the proof is in the pudding. These people believed God, and then they showed on the outside what happened on the inside. They repent. To repent in Scripture generally means to turn away from sin, and turn towards God. These people don't just put on sackcloth, but they actually turn from their sin.

9 Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

It's a powerful cry isn't it? The Ninevites realize that God is the God of heaven who made sea and dry land. This God does as he pleases. He does not cater to men and neither can people twist his arm. The captain of the ship in chapter 1 cried out in desperation, "Perhaps [Jonah, your God] will give a thought to us, that we may not perish." And in the same way the Ninevites realize they are at the complete mercy of God, "Who knows whether God will not have mercy on us and forgive our sins and spare us so that we won't perish?"

There is no pretense of false religion here. The idols in the city can't save. There is no presuming upon the Lord's grace. The people can't say, "Well we fasted and stopped our violence so God has to show us grace." Nothing of the sort. The greatest city on earth at the time simply cries out for mercy, and asks God to turn from his fierce anger!

But what hope could they have? They could have the same hope as you and I today. We cast our hope on the God who saves. When the fulness of time came the Father sent forth his Son to die for sinners. The Ninevites could place their faith in the God who would send his Son as a ransom for sinners in the same we put our faith in the God who has sent Christ as a Redeemer.

And it doesn't matter who you are or what your social class is. Whether you're the prime minister or the poorest person. I hear recently that Bill Gates has surpassed Jeff Bezos as the richest person on earth. That's quite the accomplishment. But neither of these two guys, no matter how great, get any more of a free pass into heaven than you. The playing field, as it were, is level. God is not obligated to save anyone. The Bible teaches that when we die, we must stand before God. And those who are found in Christ will be given eternal life. But those who have not repented and believed, will face judgment in the lake of fire where the fire never cools, where the pain never eases. The picture of the king of Nineveh stepping down from his throne is simply a picture of what each one of us must do before God. The only hope of any sinner is to cry out, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

But we must ask one more question before we move to our last point. And it's this, What was Israel, God's chosen nation, doing at this point in time? While the leaders of Nineveh were calling a fast and urging people to turn from their sins, what were the leaders in Israel up to? Well you can read about it in 2 Kings 14-17. During Jonah's years as a prophet the king in Israel is Jeroboam II. And 2 Kings 14 tells us that he did what was evil in God's sight. After Jeroboam II there were 6 more kings in Israel before God judged the nation and sent them into exile. Do you know how many of them were assassinated? Five of them. And when the sixth is reigning God judges Israel and they are carried off into captivity. And 2 Kings 17 tells us Israel is crushed by God's judgment because they make idols to all sorts of other gods and don't serve the true God of heaven. They

burn their children in fire to these gods and they forget God's Word. You see, the story of Jonah is partly an indictment against God's own people.

Brothers and sisters, do you still know what it is to humble your hearts before this God? Do you still know what it is to weep and to mourn over your sin? Or have you begun to forget and despise the salvation of God? Are you too busy to meditate on how Jesus died for you?

What can we say but Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy on us.

So we've seen that God sends Jonah to preach. When the Ninevites hear God's message they believe God and they repent. And they don't just do it in words but they show it by their actions.

And now lastly, we look at how God relents:

3. God relents

10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

We've come full circle now. Nineveh's evil had come up before God (in ch. 1), now God sees their faith and repentance, and his wrath is turned away.

We need to carefully define the word "**relented**." It is not the same word that is typically used in the OT for "repenting." It often signifies a turning of the heart. God himself does not change. Neither does he make mistakes. And his favour towards men does not blow around like a leaf on the wind, blown about by the actions of men. The fact of the matter is that the real change takes place with the Ninevites, as they see their need for salvation.

God's heart was already turning towards Nineveh and growing warm in compassion. Think about it, God was so determined to send word to the Ninevites that he chased after Jonah with a storm when Jonah didn't want to go preach to them. And when this messenger was about to die at sea God saved him by a great fish who brought him back to dry land. The commission of Jonah ch 1 and his re-commission in ch 3 is here because God already had pity on these wicked people.

See, Nineveh doesn't force God to change, instead, God's heart was already warmed to them so that even while they were enemies he sent them his messenger. And when they believed God's message, God was already prepared to forgive them and to have pity on them!

Listen to Jer 18:7 "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it."

When we get to the NT isn't this the richness of the gospel of Jesus Christ? When you realize your sin and repent and believe, you don't wake God up as it were. God loved the world so much that he sent his only beloved Son Jesus Christ to die on a cross for sinners. For the worst of society! For you.

While you were still an enemy! You can do nothing, and God is under no obligation to save you. But put your faith in Christ and turn away from your sin, and you will find a God who is merciful and who turns away from the judgment that we deserve.

As we close, just two thoughts. First, beloved, do you think that God purposes to save sinners without your help or mine? You know, I've actually heard people in churches say, "ah, evangelism, that's what the pastors and elders are supposed to do." But that's not at all what the Bible teaches. If you have experienced God's love, if you know that Jesus died for your sins, to take away God's wrath, and to promise you eternal life, then you have a job to do. God has his elect everywhere, waiting to be saved. So, tell others about the rich mercy that God has on sinners when they repent. Pray for those who labor in gospel ministry. And support them with your monetary gifts so that more and more sinners will have an opportunity to hear about Jesus.

And lastly, brothers, sisters, friends, is your faith weak? Are you burdened by sin? Do you lack confidence that you are safe in Christ? Maybe, you've never actually put your faith in Jesus? Do so now. Repent of your sins. And remember that God sees what is in your heart. And if you truly put your faith in Jesus as your only Savior, as your only hope, as your anchor which is cast on the solid rock of the hope of a resurrected body and life eternal, then you can be assured that you will find a God who is merciful and patient. Be comforted that God loved the world so much that he sent us a Savior, and that he has purposed to send his message to sinners like you and me, so that we might believe and turn from our sin and be healed, and be comforted, and find eternal peace in Christ Jesus.