

Sunday December 3rd sermon: "God's Mighty Power to Save Us -- Start Giving Thanks Now! (Pt 2)"

Preached at the Lord's Table at Grace Bible Church in Greenwood, MS,  
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Jonah 3; John 3:1-21

Jonah gives us a striking example of thanksgiving and praise in time of great distress.

Because of his disobedience to God, he ended up being thrown overboard into the sea, but God saved him from drowning by sending a great fish to swallow Jonah up from the water.

Jonah began giving God praise and thanksgiving for His mighty saving power, even while he was still in the fish's belly. Salvation is of the Lord!

In Jonah's story, the power of God to save Jonah from the sea is obvious to us. But the power of God to save Nineveh is often missed.

Those people were exceedingly wicked and violent. They started wars, and plundered and murdered entire nations.

But God delivered Nineveh from divine judgment by a powerful working in their hearts, to hear Jonah's warnings, to believe them, and then to call upon God for mercy.

It was an astounding example of conversion by God's power, that these bloodthirsty people believed the word from the Lord and called upon Him!

Why should they believe Jonah's preaching? They didn't worship Jehovah, they worshiped their own false gods who were nothing but idols.

What other nation had ever heard God's word, believed it, and repented and called out for mercy? Even Israel wouldn't believe God's word and repent!

Paul described the external means by which God saves His people: God saves everyone who calls upon Him for mercy. But nobody can call upon God for mercy, unless they believe what God has said. Nobody can believe what God has said, unless they hear what God has said. Nobody can hear what God has said, unless somebody preaches it to them. And nobody will preach it to them, unless a preacher is sent.

In Nineveh's case, God used His mighty power to make Jonah preach to Nineveh. Jonah preached to the people, the people heard God's word from Jonah, the people believed what God had said, and the people cried out for mercy to God. Even their king was involved in this national repentance.

But Paul enters a caveat: not everyone to whom God's word is preached will believe. As Isaiah lamented, "who has believed our report?"

As believers, we all know the beauty and power of what Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 53: God's Lamb, punished in our place, for our sins laid upon Him by God Himself. It proclaims Christ's perfection, love and determination to save His people from their sins by His propitiatory sacrifice to God.

The glory of it will break the heart of anybody who has trusted in Jesus!

And yet, Israel refused to believe it! They have for the most part rejected Christ as their savior, even while He hung on the cross, and was fulfilling God's gospel promises right before their very eyes!

Even today, some so-called "Christian" teachers don't believe Isaiah's Gospel message! They blasphemously reject substitutionary atonement by Christ, which is forcefully proclaimed by the prophet.

So Paul makes it clear: hearing the Gospel is absolutely NECESSARY for salvation, but it is not SUFFICIENT. Another thing is needful: God

working in wicked hearts to cause them to repent and believe what God has promised.

This truth makes many people angry, because they suppose that anybody can believe the Gospel by their own "free will."

As experience sadly shows, that's not how it works at all. Most who hear the Gospel dismiss it and refuse to believe.

To believers, the Gospel is so obviously true, and good news to poor lost men, that we can hardly grasp the deadness of lost men in their sin.

But God warned Isaiah when He commissioned the man to proclaim the truth to Israel, that almost nobody would believe it.

In fact, it takes a miracle from God for people to believe the Gospel!

Just as God worked a powerful work in the hearts of the people of Nineveh to bring them to believe His word and cry out for mercy, so too it is necessary for the Holy Ghost to work the conversion of poor dead sinners to believe God's word.

Jesus explained this to Nicodemus. Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Jesus clarified, that to be born again, means to be born by the Spirit of God.

Being born again is not something we can do to ourselves, any more than we could bring about our own physical birth. Only God can cause a lost man to be born again by the Spirit.

Nicodemus could not believe Christ's gospel at that time, because he had not yet been born again by the Spirit.

The work of the Spirit is secret and mysterious. It's not something we can control, or predict. Like the wind blowing, a man is suddenly born again by the Spirit, without any control whatsoever by men.

We must pray that God works a mighty work of conversion in the hearts of our lost loved ones and neighbors, because we cannot do it ourselves. We cannot give faith to the lost, and they cannot generate it on their own steam either.

At the Lord's Table, we celebrate God's mighty power to save us – the incarnation, Christ becoming the God-man to save us, to take away our sins by sacrificing Himself in our place. All these are exhibitions of God's mighty power to save.

But let us not forget to give thanks for that mighty power by which God changed our hearts and minds, and caused us to believe. It is far more astounding than God's power to save Jonah with the great fish!

It is like the power God wrought to change the wicked hearts of the people of Nineveh to hear God's warning, and believe it, and call upon Him for mercy!

Truly, salvation belongs to the Lord!