

PROPHET PREACHING

When God Gets His Servant Back on Mission

A Journey through Jonah: Embracing and Extending God's Scandalous Mercy

Texts: *Jonah 3:1-10; Jeremiah 18:7-10; Isaiah 55:10-11; 2 Cor. 4:1-6*

Jonah 3:1-10 *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"⁵ 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. ⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

Jeremiah 18:7-10 *If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ 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. ⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.*

Isaiah 55:10-11 *"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

2 Corinthians 4:1-6 *Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

When we began our journey through the 48 verses that comprise the powerful story of the relentless grace and scandalous mercy God sovereignly determines to extend to whomever He wills – even to those who sin willfully and horrifically against Him and others, – we noted the message of the book is delivered through a story line that

unfolds in a series of powerful scenes that are ***artfully designed, carefully constructed, and filled with hard hitting theological truth*** designed to ***impact our senses, stir our consciences, and move our hearts*** to be ***joyfully receptive to the Word of God, thankfully obedient to the will of God, and eagerly engaged in the work God wants to do in and through us as He compels us to extend His amazing grace and unmerited mercy to others near and far from us.***

Just like the paragraph above is tightly packed with massive literary, theological, spiritual, and personal realities that are both significant and essential to our lives – so is the book of Jonah. And like the paragraph above – seeing, understanding, and grasping all that God is communicating in this little book demands that we read and study these four chapters carefully, thoughtfully, and repeatedly.

The book unfolds like a compelling drama in which the first half speaks to the preparation of an unwilling, prodigal prophet for the stunning work God intends to do through him. The second half of the drama speaks to the nature of the work that God desires to do through His prodigal prophet with the focus being on the means by which that work is accomplished (the Word from God), the manner by which the benefit of that work is obtained (belief and repentance), and the desperate need that even spiritually enlightened and outwardly righteous servants have for God to do the same work in them (Jonah's own hardened heart).

The story is told through two primary characters – a self-righteous, torah-keeping Prophet whose love for Israel and desire to see her become great again surpassed his willingness to allow God to show mercy and extend grace to whomever He wished. He was eager to warn Israel of coming judgment. He was happy to preach grace and announce mercy from God as long as it was to Israel – God's chosen people.

However, when God decided to show mercy and extend grace to Israel's greatest enemy, the Assyrians, Jonah resisted on theological, national, and personal grounds. And when God commanded His prophet to go to their capital city, Nineveh – Jonah ran ... 2500 miles the other direction.

Years later, Jonah wrote his story down in a way that invites his readers to travel with him on his prodigal run from God! And as he wrote, he wove important details into the story that he intended thoughtful readers to pick up and retain so that the story will shape our lives and not merely capture our attention.

Last time we saw Jonah, he was crawling up on the shores of Joppa having experienced God's mighty deliverance from death at the bottom of an angry ocean. ***Jonah dries himself off and begins the journey to the temple in Jerusalem to offer his sacrifice, pay his vow, and keep his promises to God – we instinctively know three things:***

- Jonah has experienced the very mercy that God sovereignly desires to show to Nineveh.
- He was no more deserving of that mercy after his willful resistance, intentional disobedience, and resentful rebellion against God than the Ninevite to whom God was sending him. In other words, he was guilty of the very same heart sins even if outwardly, he appeared morally upright and spiritually enlightened.
- Jonah was outwardly compliant but inwardly, his attitude toward God's mission remained fundamentally unchanged. In other words, God had rescued His prodigal prophet from the depths of the ocean, but He has not yet rescued Jonah from Jonah!

And that is where we pick up our story this morning – a story of how redeeming grace and scandalous mercy brings a second chance to a stubborn servant like Jonah and ultimately, stubborn people like us!

I. A Gracious Recommissioning (3:1)

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,

As Jonah finished his worship at the temple in Jerusalem (2:4), made his thank offering, and paid his vows (2:9), God speaks to His prodigal prophet . . . ***a second time.***

The word “***again***” in this text is one of the most powerful and gracious words in the whole book! This single word contains an ocean of God's mercy and is filled

with evidence of God's gracious heart to someone who has willfully sinned against Him and resisted at every step until finally, at the bottom of an angry ocean about to run out of air and life – this prodigal prophet finally cried out to God for help.

You will remember Jonah's rebellious run from God involved more than just moving away from God's will. It was far more serious than disregarding God's command to go to Nineveh. Jonah resigned the prophetic ministry to which he had been appointed, renounced his place among God's chosen people, and removed Himself from the land where God had chosen to manifest His presence on earth.

Moreover, Jonah had continued his prodigal run even after God graciously intervened by sending a storm to get his attention, and even after God graciously exposed him by the lots the sailors cast.

So hardened was Jonah's heart and so determined his will against the sovereign will of God, that when faced with the choice of repenting or perishing – Jonah willfully chose to perish.

So, when Jonah tells us that the "*word of Yahweh came unto me a second time*" . . . he wants us to understand the immense mercy and grace that had come to him. And though he did not understand or appreciate it at the time, he does not want us to miss the magnificent grace and mercy of God to offer him a second chance!

A. God's grace rescues us from the consequences of sin.

- Centuries later, Paul would remind Christians at Rome that "*the wages (consequences) of sin is death*" (Rom. 6:23). The image is that of a criminal who has been condemned to death by execution on account of his crime.
- James affirms the same spiritual reality that if we let sin go unrestrained in our life, it leads to death (James 1:15).
- Jonah believed this truth even from his limited OT vantage point. He knew the Assyrians were great sinners whose wickedness merited righteous wrath and national destruction by God.

- But Jonah was guilty of the same rebellion and wickedness in his own life when he willfully disregarded, blatantly disobeyed, and arrogantly resisted God. And because he was guilty . . . he merited the death he was about to experience as the just consequence of his wicked disobedience.
- And that is what Jonah wants to make sure we pick up in this story – that ***no amount of theological truth we possess, or outward spiritual activity we display excuses us from the just wrath of God*** that demands condemnation on all who sin!
- Thankfully, Paul went on to say, “*but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Rom. 6:23b)
- And that is what Jonah experienced – God’s free and sovereign gift of mercy! A mercy that rescued him from the consequences of his disobedient, prodigal run from God.
- And that is what you and I experience, when God hears our desperate cry (like Jonah’s in 2:2) and rescues us from the death-inducing consequences of our own sinful disobedience.

B. God’s grace renews us to fellowship that has been broken.

- But there is more here for our instruction! Jonah wants us to know that in addition to being rescued by God, his fellowship with God has been restored . . . again!
- And this restoration, Jonah says, is not just for stubborn, prodigal Old Testament prophets, it is also available to us!

C. God’s grace restores us to service that has been forfeited.

- There is one final thing Jonah wants to make sure we don’t miss in this wonderful text – God has restored to him all that he foolishly, wickedly forfeited when he ran from God’s presence.
- “*The word of the Lord come again*” – formal language signaling the official authoritative ministry of one of God’s prophets.
- In other words, God has restored Jonah to his former place among God’s people and to his former ministry to God’s people.
- Jonah stands as an OT example that God is a God of second chances! But there is a powerful NT example – Peter!

- Jesus addresses Peter in a way that intentionally connects him to Jonah – *“Simon, son of Jonah”* (Matthew 16:17).
- Like Jonah, Peter was entrusted with an amazing revelation from God about Jesus . . . *“Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but my Father who is in heaven!”* (Matthew 16:17b)
- Like Jonah, Peter struggled deeply with a part of God’s will he did not like, nor could he agree with – Jesus’ revelation that He was going to Jerusalem in order to die! Consequently, Peter resisted the Lord on this point and was severely rebuked by the Lord for his resistance (Matthew 16:21-23).
- Like Jonah, Peter struggled with the idea that the gospel was to be preached to unclean gentiles and the Lord had to make a serious correction to expand Peter’s spiritual horizon (Acts 10). And the place where all of this took place was the last place someone like Peter would have willingly wanted to be – on the roof of the home of a Roman centurion who lived in the port city of . . . Joppa!
- While we are more than happy to preach the forgiveness of God for sins, but we are far less comfortable with the generous impact of God’s mercy on those who are its recipients.
- We are often willing to forgive someone – but we are far less to afford that person a second chance. And we somehow think God is like us . . . willing to forgive but not so willing to restore the opportunity that was lost through a second chance.
- But Jonah and Peter would both stand before us this morning to tell us we are wrong about that! They would say to us, *“Look at us! We are proof that God is willing to grant second, third, fourth chances and more!”*
- Which brings us to the second important observation Jonah wants to make sure we don’t miss in this text.

II. A Word Centered Proclamation (3:2)

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”

- What was the nature of what God wanted to do at Nineveh? By the end of the chapter, we know exactly what God has sovereignly designed to do – to extend His unmerited mercy on wicked sinners who are the greatest living enemies of His people in that day.
- But how does God design to go about extending that mercy? Through the ministry of His Word – which is the same way He goes about extending His mercy to us today.

A. Spirit Directed Ministry – “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city”

- Jonah has already told us important things about Nineveh.
- Nineveh was ***a great city*** – large in size (120,000 spiritually ignorant adults); significant in influence (capital of Assyria).
- Nineveh was ***a wicked city*** – center of idolatrous worship in Assyria. Filled with wickedness – idolatry, immorality, injustice, and violence on a national and individual level (1:2; 3:8).
- Nineveh was ***a city that belonged to God*** (“*a great city to God*” 3:3) and of ***great concern to Him*** (4:11) – Nineveh mattered to God.

B. Spirit Authorized Message – “proclaim to it the proclamation that I tell you”

- God had a ***specific, official message*** for Nineveh and Jonah was authorized to deliver that message.
- This message was ***confrontational*** – it dealt directly with the consequences of Nineveh’s sin.
- This message was ***clear*** – “*in 40 days Nineveh will be overturned.*” This is the same term Moses used in Genesis to describe what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew those cities by His judgment! (Gen 19:25-29; Isaiah 13:19; Jer. 20:16; Amos 4:11)
- This message was ***compassionate*** – God did not have to warn Nineveh of his judgment, but He did.
- This message was ***gracious*** – the term “overturned” is ambiguous. It can mean “overthrown” as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. BUT it can

also mean “to thoroughly turn” or “change” as when Spirit of God rushed on Saul and he was temporarily transformed “*into another man*” (1 Sam 10:6).

C. Spirit Energized Minister – “Jonah went according to the word of the Lord” (3:3b)

- Jonah wants us to know that everything that happens from this point on in the story happens “*according to Yahweh’s word*” – in other words it is God directing everything that Jonah does, authorizing all that he says, and energizing all that he does!
- He goes to Nineveh in the strength which God supplies.
- He goes into the city and as soon as he starts preaching, people start listening and then they begin repenting . . . and by the end of the chapter, the entire city has been “overturned” by the preaching of this reluctant prophet.
- Clearly this kind of amazing response wasn’t due to the powerful oratory, the compelling personality, or the national popularity of the preacher as we so often believe to be the case when God does something in our day and age!
- What happened at Nineveh has only one explanation and Jonah wants to make sure you don’t miss it . . . everything that happened was because God energized His servant as he proclaimed God’s message! God is the reason for all that happened!
- And to make his point abundantly clear, Jonah makes sure to remind us that when he went to Nineveh, he went reluctantly not willingly!

III. A Reluctant Compliance (3:3-4)

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

- After paying his vows and offering his sacrifice to God and after receiving God's second commission to go to Nineveh . . . Jonah arises (like he did in chapter 1:3) but this time he complies and goes to Nineveh according to the word of Yahweh.

- But, Jonah wants to make sure we understand that his compliance with the word of God was not the same as joyful submission to the will of God.

A. Rescued by God but not Reconciled to God (note his silence).

- Note that as he did in chapter 1:1-3, Jonah was silent in the face of God's command to go to Nineveh.
- We suspect that he has not yet reconciled himself to God's decision to show mercy to Nineveh, but we don't know for sure until Jonah verified his resistance and resentment toward God in 4:1-4.

B. Thankful for personal deliverance but not grateful for divine mercy.

- Jonah has paid his vows and made his offering at the temple.
- He has fulfilled his part of the bargain he believed he made with God to receive divine rescue and deliverance.
- However, he has not yet perceived that what he received from God was immense, undeserved, and unmerited mercy.
- Jonah wants us to see that the real issue going on in his heart remained unresolved because he was not yet truly repentant!

C. Compliant to God's command but not Submissive to God's will

- Note Jonah's ***partial obedience*** – went a day's journey (3:4)
- Note Jonah's ***partial proclamation*** – "40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown!"
- Note Jonah's ***partial personal ministry*** – Jonah wants to make sure you don't miss what he did **and** what he did not do!
- He was willing to announce God's approaching wrath, but he was not willing to do what Moses did for the 40 days he was on the mountain interceding for

Israel when they provoked God's fierce anger by their idolatry – an idolatry remarkably like that of Nineveh.

- Jonah preached for one day and then waited for God's wrath to fall. Moses interceded for 40 days beseeching God to spare Israel.

IV. A Spirit Enabled Repentance (3:5)

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.

- So what was the result of Jonah's ministry? *"The people of Nineveh believed God!"* This is an amazing statement – these people did what Abraham did when he heard the call of God (Gen 11, 15, 22; James 2:23; Romans 4:3).
- Given Jonah's reluctant compliance to the will of God and partial obedience to the command of God, how on earth do you explain a whole city believing in a God who was known to them but unfamiliar to them on the basis of a five-word warning uttered by a foreigner who appeared in their midst unannounced?
- Clearly, what happened was not due to Jonah or to his ministry but rather to the gracious work of the Holy Spirit that attended the preaching of God's Word!
- That same Spirit is how God's work is done in our own hearts as we hear God's word in our day. ***Note three aspects of His work:***

A. Spirit Enlightened Understanding – the source of true belief starts when God opens blind eyes to the truth of His Word (2 Cor. 4:1-6)

B. Spirit Energized Belief – the essence of faith that leads to righteousness before God starts with God enlivening dead hearts and giving to them the gift of faith (Eph. 2:4-10).

C. Spirit Enabled Repentance – the evidence of genuine belief is that God grants repentance (2 Tim. 2:24-25) that turns us from our idols to worship the true and living God (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

So, what are we to do with a story like this? How are we to respond to such magnificent mercy? What are we to learn from the story of a stubborn prophet who remains stubborn even after receiving such mercy? What truth is there for us when we watch God grant repentance to an entire city of people who know little about Him and who have sinned wickedly against Him?

V. A Pointed Spiritual Instruction (Jer. 18:7-10; Isaiah 55:10-11)

There are several powerful lessons that Jonah wants to make sure we don't miss as we listen to the first part of this scene. We must not miss:

- The beauty of God's willingness to grant mercy on underserving sinners when they believe His word and repent – turning away from their idols to worship and serve Him as the true and living God.
- The tragedy of Israel's wasted opportunity in the face of repeated mercy.
- The immense incongruity of Jonah's spiritually hard heart even after experiencing great mercy.
- The spectacular power of God's Word to accomplish His purposes for His glory and for the good of His people (Is 55:10-11)
- God's sovereign right to show mercy wherever, whenever, however, and on whomever He designs (Jer.18:7-10).

Conclusion: Life Lessons

1. God's Grace is always available to His children if they are willing to respond to His Word – so look to this grace and avail yourself of its enabling strength daily, not just on your darkest day!
2. A fresh Start from God is an un-marred opportunity for God, so seize it when it comes and don't waste it!
3. A second opportunity from God is never second best, so live your best life now without the crippling hinderance of past regret.
4. God's mercy is as wide as His sovereignty, so receive it gratefully, enjoy it fully, but never presume on it foolishly.
5. God's Word will always accomplish His purposes in us, for us, and through us for His Glory – so receive it gladly, respond to it eagerly, be ruled by it joyfully, and rest in it confidently.
6. God's Spirit can illuminate even the darkest eyes – so ask God to open your eyes so you can see His truth clearly.
7. God's Spirit can enliven even the deadest of hearts – so ask God to grant you new strength and fresh life so you can live for him and not yourself!
8. God's Spirit can enable even the most desperate of sinners to repent – so ask God to enable you to turn from your own personal idols (whatever or whoever they might be) to worship and serve Him alone!
9. Repentance is granted by God, so don't assume or presume on His grace. When God's Spirit convicts, repent rather than resist!