

# Jonah

*But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:3a ESV)*

*And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. (Jonah 4:2 ESV)*

*And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?” (Jonah 4:4 ESV)*

*And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11 ESV)*

## **Justice and Mercy**

**September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**Jonah 3:1-10**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Turn with me in your Bibles to Jonah, chapter three.

One of my favourite quotes comes from a theologian by the name of A.W. Tozer. You’ve likely heard this quote before, and rightfully so. He famously wrote:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.<sup>1</sup>

Do you believe that? I sure do. I believe that more and more with each passing day.

I have met so many people whose lives have been twisted and distorted by an overly simplistic view of God. Either they view Him as only just and holy and they live in hiding and shame, or they view Him as only merciful and loving and they live in sin and carelessness. When we fail to deal honestly with the breadth and the scope of God, we get ourselves into serious trouble. Tozer is right: What you believe about God is the most important thing about you.

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 3.

The book of Jonah is essentially a story about a prophet who failed to wrap his mind around the breadth of God's character. In particular, Jonah knew about God's mercy, but he simply couldn't understand how God's mercy could coexist with another aspect of God's character that he loved – God's justice.

Jonah loved that God was just, and he longed for the day when God's justice would rain down on Nineveh! The Ninevites oppressed the Israelites. The Ninevites were the enemies of Jonah's people. The Ninevites did not honour God therefore the Ninevites were due for a FRIGHTENING WAKEUP CALL because God is JUST! I wonder how many times Jonah preached a sermon just like that in his hometown.

“Every wrong that the Ninevites have done to us will be punished by the just Judge of the universe!” ... Unless of course God's mercy gets in the way.

Do you see the problem? Jonah couldn't understand how these two aspects of God's character could fit together.

So he fled. He hopped on a boat and set sail to the farthest place he could find from Nineveh. But God wasn't done with His prophet. He sent wind and waves and ultimately cast Jonah into the sea. There, in the sea, a great fish swallowed Jonah and he remained in that fish for three days and three nights. In the belly of the fish, he came to realize that he desperately needed mercy, and he marvelled at the fact that God's mercy extended even to people like him! Last week, Jonah learned the lesson that mercy really IS good news! This morning, Jonah will be asked to extend an opportunity for that mercy to his enemies. That's where we pick up in the story. Look with me to Jonah chapter three. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

<sup>10</sup> 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. (Jonah 3:1-10 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I’ve reminded you each week, the prophetic message of Jonah is bound up in the story. Most of the prophetic books have an oracle or a word of prophecy, but Jonah understood that his LIFE was the sermon. Therefore, let’s lean in close this morning and survey the story.

## Surveying the Story

The first detail that we need to unpack in this story is:

### 1. The second chance

Allow me to set the scene for verse one of our text. Jonah is lying on a beach reeking of fish. He’s been in absolute darkness for three days, so his eyes are squinting and adjusting to the light like a newborn. In fact, the whole event must have felt an awful lot like a re-birthing of sorts. Jonah was back from the dead, lying in the mud, when he heard a familiar voice:

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” (Jonah 3:1-2 ESV)

If you flip back a page in your Bible, you’ll notice that this is almost the exact same command that God gave to Jonah in verse two of chapter one. “Arise! Go!”

Do you remember what happened the first time? He was told to arise and go but instead he arose... and fled! He ran in exactly the opposite direction! But here, Jonah is given a second chance.

Now, that begs a question: Why did God give Jonah a second chance? He could have *easily* commissioned another prophet to take Jonah's place. He didn't need Jonah. God spoke to Balaam through a donkey! He spoke to Moses through a burning bush! No, God didn't need Jonah.

But Jonah needed Him.

God loved Jonah so much, that he refused to allow him to miss this lesson. Jonah's mission to Nineveh was just as much about his own heart and the hearts of the Israelites as it was about the Assyrians. The Ninevites weren't the only ones who needed to throw themselves upon grace and to cry out to the God of second chances. So, God sent a storm and a fish to get his prophet back on mission. As one commentator notes:

He will not be frustrated by the effrontery of a prophet, nor has he allowed the prophet to wander indefinitely off course.<sup>2</sup>

Whenever we do child dedications here, we pray and ask God for boring testimonies. As a rule, we don't want our little ones to spend three days and nights in the belly of a whale. We don't want them to have painful seasons of rebellion to look back on. We really don't, and we're going to keep praying for those boring testimonies.

But, as we do, let's allow this text to remind us that even if our sin does lead us into dark places – even if we've plummeted to the depths and stood on the brink of death itself – if we confess our sin and turn to God in faith, He can use even the ugliest story. I love this quote from an old pastor:

Jonah's history is, as we have seen, sad and sorrowful in the extreme; but grace delights to take up just such as he<sup>3</sup>

Our God is a God of second chances. He called to the humbled, re-birthed prophet: "Arise! Go!" And we read in verse 3:

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. (Jonah 3:3a ESV)

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<sup>2</sup> Joyce Baldwin, Thomas Edward McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets - Volume Two – A Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 576.

<sup>3</sup> H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, (New York, NY: Bible Truth Depot, 1928), 209.

The prophet is back on mission. God's word will not be stopped. And that leads us to the second detail that we need to unpack in this story:

## 2. The powerful word

God's word is living and active – sharper than any double-edged sword. There is POWER in the word of God!

I wonder, do you believe that this morning?

Honestly, I'm asking you. Do you believe that the word of God possesses power? Do you believe that there is power in the word to change the heart of your loved one? Do you believe that there is power in the word to bring about a revival in this city? Do you believe that there is power in the word to bring dead bones to life? Look again at God's command for Jonah in verse 2:

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it **the message that I tell you.**” (Jonah 3:2 ESV)

Look closely at the text. I want you to notice that Jonah didn't go into Nineveh sharing a message *about* God. He went with a message *from* God. There is a world of difference.

Too often in our interactions with the world, we bring a message *about* God. We say, “Oh, my God is so good, and I bet you would love Him too if you got to know him.” We speak as if we're trying to set up a blind date! But is that what we are called to?

No! We are called to deliver a message *from* God. We are called to go into the world and to say, “There is a God, and He has spoken, and here's what He says to you today!”

There is POWER in the word of God!

Look again at our text this morning. Here is a prophet who doesn't know his audience, who doesn't even LIKE his audience, and who wants more than anything for them to reject his message and to carry on in their ways. I haven't taken any public speaking courses, but I'm pretty sure that this recipe SHOULD NOT WORK!

And, in fact, the message itself wasn't particularly winsome or impressive. We read in verse 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!**" (Jonah 3:4 ESV)

Eight words. My two-year-old could preach that sermon. There was no PowerPoint presentation. There was no soft pad music in the background setting the ambience. There was just a filthy, fishy prophet shouting out words that he had heard from God and hoping that nobody would listen.

And yet, those eight words from God did exactly what Jonah didn't want them to do. Those eight words from God possessed POWER! Because they were from God! The word of God is living and active! And so, in spite of Jonah, we read:

And the people of Nineveh believed God. (Jonah 3:5a ESV)

The entire city believed! The people trembled, the news spread, and eventually:

The word reached the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:6a ESV)

Can you imagine a revival of this magnitude? The whole city believed! The king believed! There was a buzz in the streets as the cultural atmosphere changed in an instant. Why?

Because God had spoken!

The grass withers, the flower fades,  
but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:8 ESV)

Amen? The powerful word went forth, and it led to the third detail that we need to consider:

### **3. The radical repentance**

If I were to ask you what the most unbelievable detail in the story of Jonah is, you would probably respond with the fish. But I think the most unbelievable detail in this story is found in verses 5-8 of our text this morning. Look there with me again:

**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.

<sup>6</sup> The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> 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. (Jonah 3:5-8 ESV)

In my mind, THAT is the greatest miracle in this story. Nineveh changed overnight! There were more than 120,000 people in that city!

Even the king repented! It’s not often that a king will confess to his wrongdoing behind closed doors. It is nothing short of a miracle that the king would confess his wrongdoing PUBLICLY with such an open display of humility! Jonah preached eight words from the Lord and a king climbed down off his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth and sat down in ashes!

It is not uncommon to hear the expression thrown around, “People never change.” Well, I can tell you this morning that people DO change. I’m looking out at a room full of changed people right now! People who used to be alcoholics but who aren’t any more. People who used to be adulterers but who aren’t any more. People who used to be selfish and self-absorbed. People who used to care only about their own comfort and pleasure. People who used to be DEAD in their sin. I see a room full of people who have changed! I even saw one when I looked in the mirror this morning.

When the living word settles on a person – when the Holy Spirit takes a hold of it and wields it like a double-edged sword – people change!

Change happens. Humility happens. Repentance happens. That’s what we see in this text. This is an example of radical repentance. The Ninevites heard the news: God’s judgement was about to fall! With that limited information, they had heard enough to know that they needed to do

something! So, they turned from their sin, and they fasted, and they clothed themselves in sackcloth, and they fell on their faces, and they said sorry to the God of heaven and earth.

Here's a lesson for us: Real repentance is evidenced by real change. As one commentator notes:

No vague or superficial confession will do; it has to be accompanied by a change of behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus said the same thing. He asked:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46 ESV)

The people of Nineveh *believed God*, and that changed them. They responded with radical repentance, and the result of that repentance brings us to the final detail in this story:

#### 4. The relenting God

The king of Nineveh had faith that there just might be a way of escape. He said:

Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” (Jonah 3:8b-9 ESV)

The king says, “If WE turn, perhaps GOD will turn. If we turn from our violence, maybe God will turn from His anger.”

It happened just as the king hoped and prayed that it would. As the people turned, so God turned. He relented of the disaster that was going to fall upon them. We find that in verse 10:

<sup>10</sup> 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. (Jonah 3:10 ESV)

Our God is the God who relents.

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce Baldwin, Thomas Edward McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets - Volume Two – A Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 580.

But what Nineveh didn't understand – what Jonah didn't understand – is the HOW of God's relenting. How could God simply overlook all the terrible things that the Ninevites had done?

Jonah didn't understand this piece of the puzzle and that's why – as we will see next week – he was so ANGRY about God's mercy for Nineveh. It wasn't right! It wasn't fair! These people REALLY deserved judgement! These people REALLY deserved wrath! How could Jonah – how could WE – continue to worship a God who was willing to turn a blind eye to such horrible injustice? Does a relenting God really deserve our praise?

Jonah didn't understand. Can justice and mercy coexist?

That's the question I want to wrestle with as we conclude our time together this morning.

### **Can Justice and Mercy Coexist?**

The Apostle Paul addresses this question in his letter to the church in Rome. Flip ahead with me to Romans 3:23-26. As you're turning there, I would go so far as to argue that these four verses are the most important verses in the Bible when it comes to understanding the gospel.

This one of the deepest, most profound passages in all the Bible, and I would argue that it is the key to the problem that Jonah could not understand. If Jonah had these verses, he never would have run away from his assignment! He would have preached to the Ninevites gladly!

Look with me now at Romans 3:23-26:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23-26 ESV)

In these verses we learn how justice and mercy can coexist. The Apostle Paul reminds us that:

We are all sinners who don't deserve mercy.

But, Jesus died for sinners who don't deserve mercy.

Therefore, God is ABUNDANTLY MERCIFUL because He shows kindness that we don't deserve!

In His mercy, God passed over former sins.

Jesus died as a payment for those sins which God had passed over.

Therefore, God is PERFECTLY JUST because every single sin has been paid for! Every wrong has been righted. Every injustice has been avenged.

Justice and mercy co-exist AT THE CROSS!

Some people hate these verses. They object, "What? So God is like some angry kid? He couldn't just forgive us of our sin? He needed to go punch a pillow? He needed to hang Jesus on a cross to vent out his anger??"

But those people don't understand sin. They want God to simply snap His fingers and erase our sin because they don't understand how wicked it is. They don't understand how destructive it is.

Jonah understood. Jonah was looking at a terrorist nation – murderers and oppressors and tyrants – and Jonah knew that a God who could simply pretend that those injustices never happened was a God who was not worthy of praise! Jonah feared that God was simply sweeping their horrific sin under the rug.

But God didn't sweep it under a rug. Not according to the Apostle Paul. God set that sin aside to be dealt with later.

Then, about 700 years after Jonah and the Ninevites had died, God sent His Son into the world. Jesus was born to a lowly virgin. He was raised by a tradesman. He was instructed in the local synagogue. The perfect, spotless, righteous, innocent God of the universe entered into this world –

this world that is marred by sin and injustice. He lived a perfect life – the life that we were called to live, but that we were unable to live.

He came alongside the broken, and he invited them to follow him. He drew near to the marginalized and he reminded them how valuable that they are in God's eyes. He called sinners – tax collectors and prostitutes and zealots – to leave their sin behind and to join him as he ushered in a new kingdom.

He was sinned against. He was betrayed. He was slandered. He was beaten. He was mocked. He was whipped. He was crucified. But in all this, he never sinned. In all this, he never turned away from his assignment. In all this, he never rejected the cross.

It was there on the cross, in an incomprehensible display of mercy, that Jesus bore the sin of the world.

He died for the sins of Jonah. Have you ever thought about that? The only reason that Jonah could marvel at God's mercy from the belly of the fish – the only reason he could cry out to God and receive forgiveness – is because God purposed to set aside Jonah's sin and to lay it on Jesus instead! Jesus died for Jonah's rebellion. Jesus died for Jonah's indifference.

Jesus died for the Ninevites. Have you ever thought about that? Jesus died for violence that was done by the hands of the Ninevites. Jesus bore in his flesh God's wrath against the terrorist tactics of the Assyrians. Everything that Jonah hated – everything that Jonah wanted to see punished – WAS punished. But it was punished in the Son of God who gave himself as a substitute for sinners.

Jesus died for every believer in this room. Earlier I mentioned that this congregation is filled to the brim with former alcoholics and adulterers and addicts and perverts and perjurers and idolators and grumblers. That's who we were. Sinners – each and every one of us.

But now God's favor shines on us. Now, God's love abounds for us. Now, we have a hope and a future, and we are going to live forever in glory with our heavenly Father! Why? How?

Because Jesus took every last one of each of our sins and he bore the curse for our sin on the cross. You didn't deserve that. It was a kindness that you could never deserve.

It was mercy.

And it was justice.

You will never understand the scandal of grace until you see that.

If you have not put your trust in Jesus – if you have not asked him to take your sin from you and to bear it with him on the cross – then you need to listen very closely to what I'm about to say: I don't know if you have forty years, or forty days, or forty minutes, but God's judgement is going to fall against that sin. And if you do not hand that sin over to Christ in faith, then the same wrath that fell on Jesus at the cross is going to land squarely on you. Make no mistake, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!<sup>5</sup> I am coming to you with a word from the Lord today:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.  
(Mark 1:15 ESV)

He is the God of second chances. His word is powerful, and it inspires radical change even in the hardest of hearts. And, when we turn from our sin, we discover that He is also the God who relents. The righteous judgement that hangs over your head today does not need to fall on you. God has sent His Son to bear your curse. So, take a lesson from the Ninevites, or else they will stand up to condemn you at the final judgement. Jesus said that:

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 12:41 ESV)

Something greater than Jonah is here. A greater warning. A greater mercy. A greater messenger. Repent. Believe. Live. Let me pray for you now.

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 10:31