

Jonah - the Reluctant Evangelist

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[0 : 0 0] 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, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

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

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.

[1 : 2 0] 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.

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.

We will now move on to our second reading, but keep a finger in Jonah because we will come back to that. Our second reading is taken from the book of Matthew, chapter 12, verses 38 to 42, which can be found on page 978 of the Church Bibles.

That's page 978. Matthew, chapter 12, beginning at verse 38.

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you. He answered, The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.

[3 : 1 3] The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Tamara, thanks so much for reading. If we've not met, my name is Martin Ayers. I'm the lead pastor here, and it would be a great help to me if you could flick back to Jonah, chapter 3.

That's page 929 in the Church Bibles, if that's fallen closed. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet to follow if you'd find that helpful. But let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

Let's pray together. Father in heaven and gracious God, we thank you that your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

And we ask this evening that, as you've promised, the unfolding of your word will enlighten us, and you will move us to see that light and to walk in that light, for our good and for Jesus' name's sake.

[4 : 24] Amen. Well, in the 18th century, there was a Christian preacher who was a household name in England and Scotland and Wales and in America, George Whitfield.

Such was the impact that he was having. He came to Canbertslang. If those of you who live in Glasgow have been to Canbertslang, just 20 minutes or so drive from here, Michael and Susan who are here live in Canbertslang.

If you've been to their home, that's Canbertslang. And for some weeks, the temperature, spiritual temperature, in Canbertslang had been rising. People had become more concerned to talk about what it meant to be right with God.

People who went to church were praying more fervently. And George Whitfield arrived on the 6th of July, 1742. He preached three times that day in the open air in Canbertslang.

You can go to the place in the park in Canbertslang where George Whitfield stood and addressed the crowds who gathered to hear him. His last sermon that day went from 9pm to 11pm.

[5 : 31] And all around his crowd of hearers, there was a deep conviction of sin. People were fearful of the judgment of God. And they were driven in a great turning together to put their trust in the Lord Jesus and receive salvation from him.

When George Whitfield stopped at 11pm, people wanted to hear more. And so a local preacher got up after him to preach and went on till half past one in the morning.

Even then, people stayed in the fields all night praying and praising God. Three days later, Whitfield preached again a communion service in Canbertslang and more than 20,000 people came to hear him.

More than 500 came to Christ that day. Two days later, thousands more gathered to hear Whitfield. History reports for us these occasions, these moments of unusually intense works of the Spirit of God.

And we call them revivals at times when many Christians become deeply affected by the Gospel in a way that they haven't been so impressed before.

[6 : 44] And it overflows out from the Christians so that lots of other people become Christians in a revival. There was one on the Isle of Lewis from 1949 to 1953.

There was one across East Africa, very substantial region of Africa, about 100 years ago in the 1920s and 30s, a huge revival. And one thing that enabled the revivals that happened in George Whitfield's life and ministry was that he was concerned to preach about Jesus to people whom others left alone.

So just outside Bristol, down in the southwest of England, there was a community of miners, the Kingswood Colliers, who lived in a community all by themselves. No church, and no one really went near them.

People kind of saw them almost as subhuman, a different kind of category of people. And Whitfield went and stood on a hill called Hannum Mount, and he started preaching to the Kingswood Colliers as they came out from the pits at the end of a working day.

And about 100 of them gathered, curious to see a preacher in his clerical robes, standing in the open air, preaching, illegal to do that at the time.

[8 : 02] And then more came until thousands were there. And as he preached to them of Jesus, the friend of sinners, the first thing he noticed that showed they were listening was that white gutters formed down their black, coal-stained cheeks from their tears.

And we can hear stories like that, and we can think, that's so heartwarming, but it could never happen again today, could it? Here in the west end of Glasgow, or in the east end, where we've just been praying, God would prepare hearts as we look to send a team and plant a church.

But so many churches around us have dwindled and closed. People around us, we might think, they've already made their minds up. They've got no interest in Jesus, or they're hostile to Jesus.

And we can find ourselves expecting nothing from sharing Jesus. So I find that it's often on holiday that I'll read a good story about a revival, and I come back all fired up, and then my convictions disappear in one conversation with a friend, where I find that they just, they look at me in bafflement, that I would think they would be interested, and my confidence ebbs away.

Well, what does God say about that? We're spending four weeks with this prophet Jonah, and my appeal to you two weeks ago when we were in chapter one is, was, and still is, please stick with us for the whole story.

[9 : 30] We finish next week in Jonah four, and it's absolute scenes, Jonah chapter four, and really helps make sense of the whole story. You are allowed to read on tonight if you'd like to, but please do come back as well.

And tonight, we're in chapter three, where Jonah arrives in this great city of Nineveh, where the just judgment of God was hanging over them. And chapter three shows us three steps that are needed for Nineveh to escape the judgment of God.

The first step is an obedient servant delivers God's word. An obedient servant delivers God's word. Have a look with me again at verse one. 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. So this is a 180 degree turn from Jonah here.

In chapter one, he was called to go up to Nineveh and he legged it in the opposite direction. He went down to Joppa, a seaport, and he got on a boat that went as far from Nineveh as it was possible to go in the ancient world off to Spain.

[10 : 45] And we might think that's what we would want to do if we heard that our church was doing a mission trip, you know, a beach mission or something. But we would probably think that if we were to think that because we might think we'd be scared that the mission wouldn't work.

Whereas Jonah wouldn't go to Nineveh in case the mission would work. And we'll see more about that next week. But he learned the hard way in chapter one of Jonah that you cannot hide from God.

And Jonah was caught in a storm that God brought and then he was rescued from the storm. So that in verse one here, God calls him a second time. Go to Nineveh.

And he goes. And there is an encouragement here for any of us if you're conscious of a time when you felt convicted that God wanted you to do something and you disobeyed him.

When you've known what God wanted you to do but you did something else instead. That we're not to think that we've burnt our bridges with God. Today is a new day and the very fact that you're here tonight is a new opportunity to respond rightly to God and his call.

[11 : 57] He is patient with us and we can obey him. So Jonah goes to be God's evangelist to Nineveh and Nineveh needs him to go.

Just as today, God's plan for the world today is for the nations to hear of Jesus. These are the times, these are the days of God's patience with the world.

He sent the Spirit to equip his people to be his witnesses to the world. Jesus says in the Great Commission, all authority has been given to me.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations. Nineveh's perilous situation in Jonah 3 is the position of the people around us who don't know God and of people in nations today who don't know a Christian.

God made them. He sees them. And he calls his people, the church, to proclaim Jesus to a world that stands under judgment for how we've lived.

[13 : 11] So then we hear about Nineveh and God calls it a great city in verse 2. In chapter 4, he calls it a great city. Again, in verse 11 of chapter 4, the great city of Nineveh where more than 120,000 people live.

And in chapter 3, verse 3, we get it again. Now, Nineveh was a very large city. It took three days to go through it. Now, that description there probably is not reflecting how long it would actually physically take to walk through it or walk around it, but to talk about the extent of Jonah's preaching visit to Nineveh as he extensively communicates to the people.

Or it may be that it was the way that any dignitary would have arrived in Nineveh, that there would have been a day to be greeted as a stranger from a far-off land, and then the next day he'd start going about business, explaining who he is and why he'd come.

But for Jonah, Nineveh would be a city like nothing else he'd ever seen in his life. For us, we think of a city of 120,000 people. We might think of Dundee, and maybe we're not very intimidated by going to Dundee.

But in Jonah's world, this is megacity. Think a city larger than any way you'd ever contemplated visiting. An epic city that is overwhelmingly powerful and populous and prosperous.

[14 : 38] And Jonah walks up to the city gates, perhaps with some trepidation, perhaps the only man they've ever met before who knows the living God.

But God calls him to go and do that because God has deep concern for cities because cities are full of people. And here in Scotland, lots of us in Scotland have a dream.

I visited a friend last summer for a barbecue in a beautiful village in Stirlingshire where he lives and there was a conservatory and you came out of the conservatory and there was this patio with the barbecue and there was this rolling lawn and you could see the mountains.

He even had one of those robot lawnmowers. Have you ever seen those? He just pressed the button and it just mowed the lawn for him automatically so that he could just sit in his deck chair and look at the hills.

And he's living that dream. The dream is spend a few years in the city enjoying the city using the city but after a few years settle in a nice farmhouse a peaceful village for rural tranquility.

[15 : 59] Now of course don't mishear me you could move somewhere remote somewhere rural because of a deep gospel concern for the people who live there.

That would be an appropriate God honouring thing to do. But I had a conversation actually just last Wednesday with a guy who is recently retired and his kids have moved away and he's moving house.

He lives in Glasgow and he's moving house and he told me he's not moving out of Glasgow he's moving to a busier part of Glasgow and he told me that he's praying that by moving there he'll have opportunities to witness to Jesus.

And his priority as he explained it to me there just really made me think of God's concern for the city of Nineveh. A great city in God's eyes because it's got people in it and God has a deep concern for people and where they stand with him.

Then we get Jonah's message let's pick that up in verse 4. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city proclaiming 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

[17 : 16] Now that's presumably not everything that Jonah said for three days I mean it might be but I take it that's the summary of his message. It's his aim sentence in his message.

The summary of Jonah's evangelistic ministry was because you are under the judgment of God. It's coming in 40 days. Today if we get a chance to speak about Jesus judgment is often not the first place we would go is it?

It's not the first place I try and go with people instinctively and yet it might be the most important thing that people need to hear. Picture Jesus in Matthew chapter 16 calling himself the son of man the son of man is going to come in his father's glory with his angels and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

Or when a tower collapsed in Jesus' times the tower of Siloam he said those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

I tell you no but unless you repent you too will all perish. A message of judgment.

[18 : 41] So that's the first step for avoiding the judgment of God. An obedient servant delivers God's word. What happens next is extraordinary isn't it? We heard it already read our second point the clueless Ninevites are convicted.

Let's pick things up in verse 5 The Ninevites believed God verse 5 The Ninevites believed God A fast was proclaimed and all of them from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth Now sackcloth that kind of gritty stuff I mean it would make you itch wouldn't it?

We don't wear sackcloth but wearing sackcloth was an expression of repentance of mourning the things you've done to displease God so it's a you wear it out of remorse the whole city here is in uproar so that even the king hears about it picture the king he's on his throne in his throne room and he hears the news from courtiers about how he's subject to doing and he hears that this wild prophet has arrived a man who spent three days inside a fish and has been saved by God to live to tell the tale and look at verse 6 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 it's extraordinary isn't it?

this is not normal king behaviour to be so deeply convicted that God's word is true that you go from the luxury of royal robes to the humiliation and pain of sackcloth from the splendour of gracing a throne to the shame of crashing down in the dust and he resolves that day he will try anything to change God's verdict on him and his city verse 7 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 and it's actually very funny isn't it?

because the farmers throw sackcloth on the animals and even even the cows repent just imagine the confused kids walking past the fields saying what are those animals dad?

[21 : 25] they look like cows but they've got like strange coats what sort of animal is that? and hearing no they're the cows kids it's the same cows but like us they're in sackcloth because we're all wearing it these are desperate times and everyone's hungry now Jonathan who's leading tonight was telling me this week that his neighbours have got a cat that is fasting because him and his family kept feeding the cat his neighbour's cat and it now has a little sign on its collar saying do not feed me and Jonathan noticed it just after he'd fed the cat but that's not that's not actually fasting that is a cat on a diet it reminds me of my friend who told me that when he was a teenager in his house some of the food in the fridge was marked by his mum not for Tom Tom wasn't allowed some of the food so the cat is on a diet but in Nineveh the livestock are braying in the fields because the farmers are refusing to give grain out because the whole city believes God's word this is a clueless city but amidst their ignorance they have thrown the kitchen sink at repentance at let's just try anything to get God hopefully to change his mind and one thing they do get right here is this brilliant lack of presumption about their repentance they know that they have no promise from God that if they say sorry he'll have mercy ultimately they know it's up to the living God whether he will have mercy and so in verse 9 the king says who knows who knows verse 9

God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish! If you think if you come under conviction that you're not the person you ought to be that you're under the judgment of God anything is worth trying isn't it?

Anything's worth trying who knows what if God would relent? And that who knows there is a corrective to kind of vending machine religion which often pagan religion that they would have been familiar with is that that tends to be how it works that people would think if I do this and this and this for God he has to give me that it's kind of deal making with God and we can sometimes wrongly import that into our Christian lives think well if I've been a good Christian if I've stuck with church when others haven't if I've made sacrifices then God will surely bless me God will give me my heart's desires well Nineveh knows it's up to God how God will respond so they repent they plead for mercy from a sovereign God but they recognize God can do whatever he chooses to do here who knows and as Israel hears this message back home from Jonah about how Nineveh responds to God's word there is an unsettling side to hearing of this overwhelming universal dramatic response here is a pagan king leading his pagan city to public repentance in a way that we know from the Bible no king of Israel ever did

Israel needed to ask themselves have we repented like this for all our spiritual heritage for all our biblical religious activity all our busyness do we really tremble at God's word like those pagans did just as today it's right for us to hear about Nineveh and ask ourselves how am I responding to God's word today am I as humble before God's commands as this pagan king was am I living a life of daily repentance grieving my own sin day by day and humbly depending on God's mercy and we see that mercy in our final point thirdly and more briefly the merciful God sees and relents have a look with me at verse 10 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 it's not that God breaks his word here such that his word would not be reliable he is always true to his word but implicit in his promise that Nineveh would be overturned in 40 days was a condition that that's going to happen unless things change so as the people repent the situation changes and God relents they no longer experience his wrath instead they experience his compassion his mercy and as we said two weeks ago when God first called

Jonah to go the warning from God that his judgment was coming that warning is in itself an act of God's mercy do you see that?

[26 : 57] that in his patience rather than sending judgment which he could have done there and then as a just God when God warns people that they're under judgment it's an act of his mercy because it gives the opportunity to change to turn to God to turn from sin and experience his grace as he relents and we might think because we're accustomed to hearing of God's grace well that's that's just what God is like it's to be expected that he would offer mercy but Nineveh was a wicked place Nineveh was a terrorist state their kings we know from archaeology their kings would depict on stone panels gruesome images of their soldiers torturing enemies when the Assyrians captured enemies they would sometimes cut off their legs and one arm so that they would leave one arm and they could shake their hand in mockery as they died they'd force friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones on poles and God's actions in this book show how remarkable his compassion really is even Nineveh

God has a deep compassion towards sinners running from him he's just he sees wrongdoing he sees wickedness for what it is he's a God of deep compassion today living our side of the cross we can have every confidence that the same compassion and mercy of God is on offer to anyone who turns back to him however far they seem from God whatever they've done and it's striking that of all the prophets of the Old Testament for Jesus to compare himself with in Matthew 12 he compares himself with Jonah when the religious leaders ask him for a miraculous sign after all the signs he's already given and he says the sign that they are given and we're given is the same sign of the prophet Jonah Jesus says just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish so the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth the men of

Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it for they repented at the preaching of Jonah and now something greater than Jonah is here so what is it about Jesus that makes him like Jonah and one greater than Jonah well he's a greater prophet bringing warning of a greater judgment the day when we'll all stand before the judgment seat of the risen Lord Jesus and like Jonah our call to repent comes from a back from the dead prophet Jonah had come back from the depths of the sea where he should have died and when the apostles spread the news about Jesus to the nations that he is God's appointed king God's rescuing king their message was more dramatic still that we can trust their message that we have in the Bible because as the apostles said of Jesus to the first audiences you killed him

God raised him we've seen him alive now never to die again and so seeing him back from the dead risen now we are to trust the word and turn back to God but Jonah went into the sea bearing God's judgment for his running away from God whereas Jesus went to the cross bearing God's judgment for our having run away from God so that when we repent we never have to ask what the king of Nineveh asked who knows who knows what God will do if you're able to admit that you know you're not the man or woman you ought to be and turn to God instead of asking who knows what God will relent because

Jesus gave himself for me now most of us here tonight are confident that we've received that mercy and Jonah's experience as God's evangelist to this great city of Nineveh it reassures us tonight that God's word has extraordinary power God's word turned the great city of Nineveh upside down and we would not have expected that of Nineveh if there was a modern equivalent of Nineveh and someone from our church got up and announced that he was looking for a team to come with him on a mission trip to tell them the gospel how many of us would volunteer to go or if there was a gap year scheme you could sign up for and go on short term mission to a place as hardened to God's people as Nineveh was would we sign up would we give money for a missionary to go to them I don't think many of us would think that that was worth bothering with but

[32 : 40] Jonah 3 teaches us that God is very very powerful and he's very merciful and sometimes God chooses to demonstrate just how powerful he is and just how merciful he is by choosing to save the most unlikely people let's allow that to encourage us as a church as we aim to reach out as we aim to plant a church let's allow what happened in Nineveh in Jonah three to embolden us as we think about the people around us this week our colleagues our classmates our neighbours our friends our family members who don't know the living God we simply don't know what's going on in people's hearts they may seem a million miles from Jesus I think of a friend who grew up in a prominent Palestinian family a prominent

Muslim family a wealthy Muslim family in the Middle East and he came to the UK to study and one of his friends on his course plucked up the courage to ask him if he would look at the Bible with him and he didn't know where to turn so he opened Psalm 23 and looked at that with him as King David says in Psalm 23 the Lord is my shepherd and they looked at that together and he said as soon as he opened Psalm 23 he said this is what I've been looking for my whole life a God who would be a shepherd to me like this and he became a Christian sometimes God chooses to demonstrate the greatness of his power and the greatness of his mercy by saving the most unlikely people folks revival really could happen in our times people all around us are in terrible times spiritually they stand under the judgment of God they can experience the transforming grace and compassion of God but they need an obedient servant to deliver

God's word they need to be convicted so that God can show mercy to them and now one greater than Jonah is here for them Amen it would be appropriate to examine our own hearts and respond to God's word in Jonah 3 with our own repentance and so in a moment Jonathan's going to come up and lead us as we do that to Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. He is faithful and just and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness as he forgives our sins.

[36 : 46] So let's say together the words of the confession. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, if we are trusting in the Lord Jesus, then as we sang at the beginning of the service, our sin not in part is nailed to the cross and we bear it no more.

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Oh, my soul. That's what we're going to do now. We're going to sing again as Andrew and the band lead us in our next song. His mercy is more. Thank you.