

Jonah 3

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Date: 28 May 2017

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[0 : 00] in our own language, freedom to gather round it. We pray for the work of your spirit among us this evening, that you would bring your word to bear urgently on our lives, just as you did to the lives of the people of Nineveh.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Put these two things together and see what you come up with. On the one hand, a reluctant preacher, taken away from a work that's going really well, sent to a group of people that he doesn't like, in a place he doesn't want to be, to do a job he doesn't want to do.

A reluctant preacher on one hand. On the other hand, an unpromising-looking audience, a great city, an evil city, an enemy city, a place of violence, a place very unlikely to like the foreign preacher any more than he likes them.

A reluctant preacher on one hand, a very unpromising audience on the other. Now let me ask you this. If this were your church, St. Silas' short-term summer mission project, let's call it Hope Nineveh for a moment.

If this were Hope Nineveh, would you, one, support it, two, be glad if your child or grandchild wanted to go on it, three, think well of your church leaders for recommending it in the first place.

[1 : 41] Hope Nineveh, that unpromising-looking city over there, and this guy as team leader, would you support that? Absolutely not, is the answer to that.

You would not support it. You would not let your children go. You would have a major loss of confidence in your church leaders for recommending this project should come up in front of you all in the first place.

Well, Hope Nineveh goes really well. Not because the preacher has a change of heart.

And not because the hearers suddenly become fertile soil. But only because the God who made the sea and the dry land and everything is absolutely extraordinary.

very kind and very powerful and able to do wonderful things with the worst of people in making himself known.

[2 : 45] Now, this is a very spectacular chapter, but it's not a complicated chapter. We'll go quite quickly through it and then spend a bit of time thinking about some of the implications. It falls into three sections.

You can follow them in your handout if you'd like to do that. The first is verses 1 to 5. The word of the Lord and the city of Nineveh. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.

Let me make a few observations on this little first section. First, Jonah's obedience. Verse 3, Jonah obeyed and went. The start of chapter 3 is very like being back at the start of chapter 1 again.

This time, he responds rightly to the word of the Lord. Now, for a while, he responds rightly. We find in chapter 4, just a minute later, he's not responding all that well, but for the moment, Jonah obeys.

Who would choose to do otherwise? He's just done time in the depths of the sea and the gut of a large fish. I don't imagine he fancied another go at that. Do you? He went.

[3 : 59] We find he doesn't go all that positively. Jonah's obedience. Second, Nineveh's greatness. Verse 3, Nineveh was a very large city. Nineveh is one of the biggest cities, probably the biggest city of the nation of Assyria.

Read modern-day northern Iraq. The city of Mosul, so commonly in our news at the moment, that's where Nineveh is.

The ruins of Nineveh are under the city of Mosul. Assyria was at this point a hostile power, though not a great threat to Israel. 20 or 30 years later, she became a massive threat.

Certainly, people hearing this story told a little while later would be all too aware of how dangerous an enemy Nineveh is.

Now, what this section makes much of is Nineveh's greatness. Verse 3, it took three days to go through it. Now, that might mean a number of things.

[5 : 06] It's unlikely, I think, to be a statement about its absolute size. As far as we know, there are no cities anywhere in the world that long ago that took three days to walk across physically.

It might mean it took a three-day visit to do Nineveh. Remember, Jonah is a prophet connected with the king back home in Israel.

And Jeroboam, the king of Israel, was a significant king at that point. Maybe a visiting foreigner with court connections gets the three-day treatment when he comes to Nineveh.

Or maybe it's more likely, I think, just a figure of speech, meaning a long enough time. Quite a while. We had a similar three days thing going on in chapter earlier in the book when talking about how long Jonah spent in the fish.

Remember, three days and three nights, a long time. Quite long enough. I think the same sort of thing is probably going on here. This is a big city.

[6 : 13] And more than that, it's big in God's eyes. Look at chapter 1, verse 2. Look at how the book starts off. Go to the great city of Nineveh.

And then look right to the end of the book, 411. Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh? To God, Nineveh is a great city.

It's wickedness is important enough to warn it about. If no one warns you when you're doing wrong, it's a sign that they don't really care about you.

God cares about Nineveh and her wrongdoing. And he sends Jonah to preach there because of that. Why is Nineveh great in God's eyes?

After all, it's a wicked city. Well, I think it's because God is the God of the whole world. Very important theme in this book. It runs in the background all the way through.

[7 : 21] The God of Israel is the creator of everything. The heavens and the earth. The sky and the sea. In chapter one, he controls the storm and he controls the fish.

In chapter four, he controls the plant and the worm that eats the plant and the scorching wind that blows over Jonah. From the biggest things to the smallest things, God is God of everything in this book.

He cares about everything from big to small. I don't know about you, but there are many important things that I care nothing about.

Sometimes my lack of care is a product of my smallness. I simply can't think about, never mind invest myself in caring for another piece of news.

Don't you ever feel that? Sometimes my lack of care is a product of my sinfulness. I just don't care and I ought to and I could. Jonah doesn't care about Nineveh because he doesn't like them and he's too turned in on life and ministry back home, but God is not small and God is not sinful.

[8 : 36] We sometimes think that God is much, much, much, much too big to care about our small life or the small issues within our life.

Quite the opposite is true. it's because he is so big that he can be truly concerned for everything, the big and the small.

Nineveh is great in God's eyes so he cares about her evil enough to do something about it, to send a preacher. Third, let me say something about Jonah's confronting message.

Verse 4. This is the only preaching of Jonah that we get in this book. It's pretty confrontational, don't you think? 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

That's guaranteed to win friends and influence people, that kind of message, isn't it? Nineveh's response is quite remarkable to that confronting message. Verse 5. The Ninevites believed God.

[9 : 39] A fast was proclaimed. All of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. That's an amazing response to such a confronting message. Overthrow is coming.

It's coming, says Jonah. Now folks, it's very easy to write Jonah off in this book, but it's worth pointing out that for all his faults, he is not lacking in courage.

It took significant courage to say that. We'll find more of the response in a moment, but for now, let me say something about the message of God to Nineveh and indeed, the message of God to the sinful world.

The message of God to the world is a confronting message. Here, judgment is coming. That's all he says. Says God to Nineveh, God is not your friend if you meet him as you are now.

You are not his friend. If you meet him as you are now, you will be overthrown. We're not told that Jonah spoke any words to persuade Nineveh of how much God loved them.

[10 : 48] Do you notice the love of God isn't mentioned in his very brief sermon summary? I imagine that more words were spoken than this, but for the author's purpose, this is what the reader needs to hear.

Nineveh needed to be persuaded that God was not on her side at the moment. Now, these are not comfortable words, but Jonah knows that those words have God's mercy embedded in them.

Let me explain that. Why would God send a messenger to warn you that overthrow was coming if all he was interested in was overthrowing you?

I mean, why not just sneak up quietly and splot you out from behind with no warning? Do you see, the message of judgment has mercy embedded in it.

Why does God send a messenger? Because he wants Nineveh to be on the receiving end of his mercy. It's very common for people to see God's judgment and God's love as being somehow opposed to one another, but that is totally unhelpful.

[11 : 57] That God judges the world is an expression of his care for it. For Nineveh, the route to mercy was a message of judgment.

And when we admit from our message the message of God's coming judgment, we rob people of the route to mercy. If we're in any doubt of that, just flip it back to Matthew chapter 12.

Turn back to Matthew chapter 12. Here is Jesus speaking.

The preacher of the coming judgment. That's what he is here. 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. Jesus, the most loving man who ever lived, preaches a judgment bigger than the judgment of Jonah.

[13 : 06] The judgment. Why? So that people will receive mercy while there's time. Well, let's flip back to Jonah chapter 3.

Jonah passes this message on faithfully. It's the message that God gave him and the people respond positively. It's an amazing result. Now let's look at the word of the Lord and the king, verse 6.

There's a lot about the king here. I'm assuming that this book is a book written for Israelite people back home and it would be very easy for an Israelite audience back home to look at the first part of chapter 5 and think, pah, I don't think much of that repentance.

I know what Assyrians are like a bit further on in time. I know what they're like. I know that their repentance has not lasted.

I know that they have proved themselves to be the enemies of God's people now. This isn't genuine. And many of the writers about this book make a big deal of pointing out that the response of the people of Nineveh is not all it might be.

[14 : 18] Interestingly, in this chapter we hear no mention of the fact that they turned away from the gods of Assyria. There's no mention of that here. The king of Assyria does not use the name of the God of Israel as the sailors did back in chapter 1.

Remember them? They cried out to Yahweh, the God of Israel, to rescue them. There's no making vows. There's no offering sacrifices as there was by the sailors back in chapter 1.

Now all of that is true but it is quite clear that this is a serious response to the word of God. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh he rose from his throne and took off his royal robes and covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust and then he issued this massive proclamation.

He descends from his throne. He removes his royal robes. He puts on sackcloth. He sits in the dust. This is not normal king behavior.

And he makes this public proclamation. Do not let people or animals or herds or flocks taste anything and do not let them eat or drink but let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Even the animals.

[15 : 34] Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. It is not normal for kings to urge their nation to repent like this urgently because some foreign preacher has wandered in and told him that judgment is coming.

Can you imagine a ruler of this country ever doing that? And notice also his lack of presumption. Look at verse 9. God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger and we may not perish.

Do you notice he doesn't presume that that's going to happen? It just might happen. There's no guarantee that God's going to take the punishment away. This is a remarkable response from a great ruler of a great city and a great nation.

Why is it recorded in this kind of detail do you think? Well I think because when verse 5 says from the greatest of them to the least the writer wants us to be in no doubt he really does mean from the greatest to the least.

King down the nation responded. This was a proper response to the word of God a fitting response a real one. Let's just step back from this for a moment and think about this for a second.

[16 : 58] We often think I often think that the word of God is not all that powerful really. It doesn't seem very powerful does it?

I mean this activity does not look powerful. You leading your small group Bible study does not look powerful. You teaching your Sunday school class does not look powerful.

The preacher on the street preaching to crowds none of whom are listening does not look powerful. and it's so easy at the personal level and the church level and the national level to think to ourselves can God's word really do anything?

Really? And it's so easy to give up on proclaiming God's word and to do instead things that look like they might be more powerful than that.

So easy because let's face it a very unpromising preacher sent to a very hostile and intimidating city does not look like it's going to produce a result but it does.

[18 : 15] In God's hands his word is very powerful. That ought to be a great encouragement to you if you're trying to sow the word of God in the lives of your family or your friends your children your work colleagues it's worth doing it's very powerful.

Let's move on and say something briefly about the gracious God and his unmoved messenger. How does God respond to Nineveh's response?

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 threatened. He didn't do what he said he would do.

Now let me tell you what this is not here to teach us. This is not here to teach us that God is unreliable. it's not that God has a personal crisis and thinks better of it here.

No right from the beginning of the story it is quite clear that Jonah knows that God intends to have mercy on the people of Nineveh that's why he sent him there.

[19 : 27] This does not mean that God does not mean what he says. You could come away from this passage thinking how do I know if God really means what he says? He said he was going to overthrow Nineveh in 40 days and he didn't.

How do I know if his words are true? Now the whole point is that God does exactly what his words lead you to think they'll do all the way through. The king expresses it really well.

Who knows God may relent. He recognizes that in the warning is the possibility of escape. The whole thing about an advance warning is that it suggests there might be a way of escape.

It's very important that we don't read the Bible woodenly here and press God's words into a rigidity that we wouldn't normally use of our own.

Let me illustrate. When my children were small and I said to them stop that and when they didn't stop that I said to them I will count to three and then there will be consequences.

[20 : 31] consequences. If you wanted to look at it rather woodenly you might say he's going to count to three and there are going to be consequences. Truth is I usually didn't get to three and very very often there were no consequences at all.

You know I never had one of the children say when there were no consequences changed your mind have you? Or I don't think much of your word you so often don't do what you said you would do.

Even a small person understands that threats of consequences are meant to lead to change in behavior and if they do the threat will disappear.

That's the way it goes isn't it in life? God speaks precisely in that way to the people of Nineveh. He doesn't do what he said he will and that's exactly what his words always implied that if they changed the threat would disappear and that brings us on to how Jonah responds.

Chapter 4 verse 1 it displeased Jonah exceedingly so that Jonah this seemed very wrong. God responds one way Jonah his messenger responds another.

[21 : 53] Jonah is very unhappy he always knew it was coming that's why he didn't want to go in the first place. Now it's come he's very very unhappy.

This chapter finishes them with a very sharp contrast between on the one hand the gracious God and on the other hand his miserable messenger.

That contrast gets explored extensively in chapter 4 and you'll have to wait for next time for more of that but for the moment let's just pull out some of the implications of chapter 3.

This is a great story chapter 3 about God mercifully confronting a city and the massive response that that confronting message has.

Why is this story here in the Bible? Well on the one hand it is there to reassure us about the great power of God's word.

[22 : 55] God is able to accomplish massive things through his word. But there's something sharper than that going on here I think. Let me ask the question slightly different. What impact do you think this chapter had on the Israelite reader back home 10 or 15 or 20 years later say when Assyria is now a threat a real threat or just after 722 BC when Assyria wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel?

What impact would this chapter have then? Well let me say two things first. What God demanded of Nineveh here God has also demanded of Israel back home.

Israel the nation this book is written to is not a neutral observer in this story. Israel has behaved just like the nations round about her and God's prophets have come to Israel in the same way that Jonah was sent to Nineveh and they've come to warning with warnings to Israel that she will be overthrown if she doesn't repent and if you read the words of the prophets Amos and Hosea prophets to the northern kingdom at Jonah's time what do they criticize Israel for?

Her violence her arrogance her abuse of the poor and most particularly her idolatry her unfaithfulness to her creator all the same sorts of things that Nineveh is criticized for in the Bible here and elsewhere Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations distinctive for God in the world to be a blessing to the world in that way but instead she became like her unwilling prophet nationalistic turned in on her own affairs and frankly disobedient to the role that God had given her in the world God has said to Israel that she will be overthrown what is God doing here he is in sending the prophet to Nineveh holding up in front of

Israel a mirror on her own behavior and how she should respond to God in Jonah's message Israel hears of a judgment she does believe in the judgment of Nineveh and it's meant to remind her of a judgment that she has not taken seriously namely her own Jonah and Israel would love to see Nineveh overthrown but cannot quite believe that if they do not repent they will be overthrown in precisely the same way that Nineveh might be what God demanded of Nineveh God has also demanded of Israel and more importantly what Nineveh did Israel has not done ever even if only for a while Nineveh repented

[26 : 28] Israel has been warned of judgment back home has there been in living memory back home in Israel a king in sack cloth calling for national repentance there has not a nation in mourning from the greatest to the least there has not been one has there been the lack of presumption demonstrated demonstrated by the king God may relent from his fierce anger has anyone in Israel ever said that not as far as we read in scripture Israel the most privileged of nations has been horrifically presumptuous about her status done all the things the world does and thought that it would be okay to ignore God's warnings I think it's probably true to say that people who've been privileged in relation to God often think that they are immune from things that the rest of the world is not immune from

Jesus speaking to the people of his day used the same story to illustrate the pride of his own people the men of Nineveh will rise at the judgment with this generation such a privileged generation think of the privilege to have the ultimate messenger of God standing in front of you and yet not respond to him they repented at the preaching of Jonah and someone much greater than Jonah is here now they repented but you won't that was Jesus' message to his generation and I take it the message of this book to Jonah's generation Nineveh they've repented albeit imperfectly what about you folks the God revealed in this chapter is absolutely amazing Jonah knows he is chapter 4 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love he's very kind and very powerful and able to do wonderful things with the worst of people and massively gracious in the mercy he holds out so gracious that he holds up in front of Israel a mirror of what she must do but has not yet done namely turned back to

God from her idols privilege and presumption often go together we reflected on this back in week one that we as a nation have had massive privileges historically huge privileges open access to God's truth huge resources almost complete absence of persecution for a long time a long time it's been a massively privileged position but privilege and presumption often go together it's true of nations it's true in churches it's true in the lives of individuals sometimes let's pray then that we might respond rightly to the privileges we have let's pray together let's just take a minute to reflect on what God has said to us in this chapter and respond to him in the quiet on our own and then

I'll lead us in prayer Jonah says to God in the next chapter I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God slow to anger and abounding in love a God who relents from sending calamity we thank you gracious God that this is true that you are slow to anger and abounding in love very very patient longing that people should come to repentance please would you help us to turn away from our idols and towards you please grant mercy to our church and our churches help help us not to regard our privileges our relative peace the untroubledness we have had historically please help us not to presume on these things we pray we pray for our national churches debating at the moment important things we pray that privilege might not lead to presumption and for ourselves for our nation please

Lord grant repentance thank you that you are slow to anger very patient help us to respond urgently therefore we ask this in Jesus name Amen I hope you and two or by justice all to