

Jonah 3 – Relentless Love

Jonah 3:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to 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, a three-day journey in extent. 4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. 6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. 7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? 10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (Jon 3:1-10)

The Seven Laws of Teaching is a great book written by a 19th century educator, John Milton Gregory. He describes seven laws for a real teaching and learning experience. One of them is that a good teacher uses what is familiar and known to teach what is unknown. You use what people know to teach them new truths. Jesus did this when He used stories involving sheep, and farmers, and weddings, and servants. He used the known as a bridge to the unknown. People could make comparisons, and find similarities.

Sometimes Jesus used another technique in teaching, one which teachers also use- contrast. Jesus would paint a picture of a cruel, wicked, unjust judge who helps a widow for selfish reasons, and then make the contrast – how will a good, loving, kind Father treat those who come to Him?

The book of Jonah teaches us mostly by contrast. Jonah is contrasted with God, and we learn not by seeing how similar Jonah was to God, but by how different he was.

The book of Jonah is not about the Ninevites. The book of Jonah is about the prophet Jonah, and specifically, how Jonah's heart was different to God's heart. Chapter 1 shows us Jonah refusing God's will, chapter 2 shows us Jonah half-heartedly repenting, and chapter 4 it comes to a climax when God confronts Jonah with how callous and hard his heart is. But chapter 3 is where we find out what God's heart is like. In chapter 4 Jonah and God come to a debate, but chapter 3 provides us with the contrast between God and Jonah. Jonah hates the Ninevites, despises them, wants them destroyed, but God has a very different heart.

Like in art, certain techniques bring things out in bold relief, so chapter 3 will bring out the sharpness of the outline contrasting God and Jonah.

Here we'll see what it is God loves. Here we will learn about God's heart for rebellious people and for rebellious prophets. This is the heart that Jonah refused to have, and it is the heart of our God. If we desire to love what He loves, we must know what sort of heart he has.

I. God's Mercy Gives Second Chances

Jonah 3:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."

Jonah here receives a second commission to go to Nineveh. He was told in chapter 1, “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."* (Jon 1:1-2)”

After refusing, and being disciplined, and coming to a halfway repentance, Jonah finds himself exactly where he began. But think of how merciful a thing it is that Jonah is getting a second chance. God does not give up on His people because of one failure. God's will is not a machine that malfunctions because of one gear that goes out. God's will goes on, and is not only able to reach his original purposes with the Ninevites, but includes his original purposes for Jonah.

God is far more interested in the work He does *in* each of us than in the work He does *through* each of us. As we find out, God could achieve the salvation of those Ninevites singlehandedly – He didn't need Jonah. If anything, Jonah was something of an obstacle to their salvation. But God wanted to use Jonah not because the work in Nineveh depended on Jonah, but because God cared enough about Jonah to want him to go through this experience. God knew that Jonah could learn lessons about love, mercy, racism, cruelty, hard-heartedness, pride and others only through this experience of preaching to the Ninevites. And God loved Jonah so much, that He was willing to go to great lengths to include him.

Even though we are dispensable to God's work, we are not dispensable to God. He loves us and wants to work in us, more than work through us. We are focused on productivity and efficiency and results and outcomes, but God can get those by just speaking the word. What He cares about is character, about our desires, our loves, our minds being conformed to His. And like an artist who loves his sculpture, He is willing to take the time to work with us, again and again, to get us where we need to be.

We can be thankful that we serve the God of the second chance. Jacob was certainly thankful to serve such a God. David was thankful to have such a God. Peter was thankful for such a God. John Mark was thankful too.

God's patient nature is not meant to supply boldness and license to those who wish to refuse God's will. It is meant to supply hope for those prodigal sons who are returning to the father. It is meant to remind us when we are close to despair about our Christian lives:

6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; (Phi 1:6)

So this time Jonah goes, and preaches. Here we see God's mercy a second way.

II. God's Mercy Gives Warnings

3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. 4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

The city of Nineveh probably included several suburbs, or sub-cities, so that all that was called Nineveh was really Nineveh and its towns. Crossing this city would have taken you three days of walking. A moderately fit person could walk around 25 kilometres in a day. So the city was probably around 75 kilometres from furthest west to furthest east, which is about the distance from Krugersdorp to Springs. We learn in chapter 4 that it had at least 120 000 children, meaning the city had around 650 000 residents.

As Jonah enters, he begins to preach. And the only record we have of what Jonah said was, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown." Now perhaps Jonah said more than that. The Bible often summarises the sermons of people.

But I have a feeling Jonah didn't say much more than that. See, as we find out, Jonah had no love for these people, and so if he was going to be obedient to the call to preach to them, he was going to do the bare minimum. He was going to tell them the truth that God was going to judge their wickedness.

The Ninevites received the absolute bare minimum in terms of Gospel preaching.

* They received a very short message, from a prophet who shed no tears for their souls. He was no loving shepherd, did not pray for the city, and no doubt preached with hardness and coldness.

*In Jonah's sermon, there was no promise of pardon, no calls to repent, and so no hope was held out. His sermon simply foretold what seemed to be an inevitable and certain doom: the destruction of Nineveh.

*He told them nothing of the God of Israel, nothing of atoning sacrifice, no call to seek the Lord, and no invitation to come to God.

I imagine Jonah performing this the way people do the job they hate. They ask, what is the bare minimum I can do that will still count as having done the job? Jonah knows that if he walks through the main roads and concourses of Nineveh for three days, and tells them that they are going to get it from God, then he has covered his bases. He has told them about their wickedness, but if they get saved, no Israelite at home could blame him. He didn't tell them about mercy and grace. He just preaches Law, not Gospel.

But in spite of this, God's love and mercy is warning the Ninevites. He could simply send unexpected destruction upon them. But the message of Jonah is mercy, and the people pick up on that. The kind of God who warns you in advance is the kind of God who does not want to destroy you. He is sending advance notice so that changes can be made.

God tells Ezekiel that a warning is mercy to people:

18 "When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. 19 "Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul." (Eze 3:18-19)

But what is the response? Look at how gracious God is to these people.

III. God's Mercy Gives Repentance

5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. 6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. 7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

What happens next is perhaps the greatest revival, or the greatest response to a sermon in history. The people believed God. They took Jonah's sermon as from God and as the truth.

And in submission to God, they expressed public, universal repentance. From the greatest citizen, down to the poorest, forgotten slave, every one of them fasted and put on sackcloth. These were signs of mourning and grief. Sackcloth was the uncomfortable clothing of one expressing suffering. A fast was a sign that all was not well, and regular eating and feasting needed to stop to seek God and ask for mercy.

Word reaches the king himself, and he does the same, and then he makes it official in verse 7.

7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

No living creature is allowed to eat or drink in Nineveh. The whole city is to stop doing business and trading and living, and instead, in his words 'cry mightily unto God' This is a national prayer meeting.

And it is not just a call for the consequences to be averted, the king says that every one should turn from his evil way and from his violence. The Assyrians didn't even need Jonah to tell them what their sins were. They knew they were violent and cruel and bloodthirsty. They knew they were a city filled with evil and ripe for judgement.

Now again, notice, Jonah did not tell them to repent. He did not tell them that there would be any mercy. But the king says in verse 9, *"Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?"*

On the off-chance that God will forgive them, the king says, let us repent, and fast, and pray.

Why did they respond like this?

The short answer is: God's merciful grace. God worked in their hearts. God loved them, prepared them, and worked this out. Even Jonah's disobedience was worked into their conversion. See, we learn from history that the main god of the Assyrians was in fact a fish-god, Dagon, a god shared by other Mesopotamian cultures. They also worshipped a goddess Nanshe, also a fish goddess. So when Jonah is swallowed by a fish, spends time within the fish, is spewed out by the fish, and whose appearance proved it – he was probably hairless and his skin bleached white from the gastric juices of the sea-creature, he would have been a wonder to the Ninevites. Our Lord said in Luke 11:30 that Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites. He was a walking sign of the supernatural power of the God he preached over the fish, over the sea, and over Dagon and Nanshe.

This was part of God's love for the Ninevites.

Think of all the things people say must be mixed in from the human side in order for revival to take place. People say the preacher must be clean and holy before God converts people. That may be true most of the time, but the preacher here wasn't consecrated.

They say the preacher must have a broken heart for the people, and spend hours interceding and pleading for God to convert. That has often been the case, but it wasn't the case here. I doubt Jonah prayed for these people once.

They say the people must have a core group that begin a prayer meeting and start crying out to God to send revival. That has happened in history, but it certainly didn't happen here.

They say a people must first begin repenting, and then God will visit them. But there is no sign these people began repenting until after they heard the Word and God worked in them.

They did not have willing hearts. They did not have a compassionate willing preacher. No one we know of had been praying for them. The Ninevite revival is the best example that when God chooses to act, God can bring about revival without any human aid. God can pour out a spirit of grace, and draw people powerfully. The Bible speaks about God granting or giving repentance.

5 in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, (2Ti 2:25)

18 And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." (Act 11:18)

26 "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 "And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. (Eze 36:26-27)

That doesn't mean the Ninevites were passive. They had to repent. And yes, they could have hardened their hearts.

But what is unmistakable here is God's heart for these people that leads them to repentance.

IV. God's Mercy Gives Forgiveness

10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (Jon 3:1-10)

God sees their repentance, God chooses not to bring about the disastrous judgement He had said He would. God's mercy gives forgiveness, deliverance, and a change in planned judgement.

Now this raises a few questions. 1) Did God not know they would repent? 2) Was God just idly scaring them to see what they would do? 3) Furthermore, does God change? Does He try one thing, and then go to another?

First, God did know they would repent. Scripture is clear that God knows the future exhaustively. 10 Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things not yet done (Isa 46:10). Unless God knew the future, He could not prophesy. In fact, the book of Revelation would become a hopeful guess on God's part. God can write the future as history, because He knows it. So, yes, He knew that the Ninevites would repent. He wasn't finding out what they would do.

In fact, God knows in at least three ways. He knows all that could be. He knew all the possible Ninevehs that could ever have existed. He knows what shall be. He knew which Nineveh he had selected which would actually exist. Third, he knew all the ways that Nineveh could have responded in different situations. We have an example of this when Jesus told the Jews that if Sodom and Gomorrah had received the revelation they had received, the city would have repented. He knew how different people and places would have responded given different situations. And that might help you work through the puzzle of election and predestination: God knows what could be, what would be, and what shall be.

Second, he was threatening them, because He knows how we are. God knows what means to use to get responses from us. Imagine if God had sent the message, "I know you will repent, so I will not end up destroying your city, so I am calling on you now to repent." Would Nineveh have repented? No, God knows what means to use to achieve the ends He has in mind. God knew what prophet preaching what message would bring Nineveh to the level of repentance He wanted. But God meant every word, and had Nineveh not repented, in forty days, they would have been destroyed.

Third, God does not change, but His dealings with men change as they change. God may not

experience time as we do, but He deals with us in ways that seem as if He does. We pray and He answers. We act and He responds. God's sovereignty does not mean that God is not dynamically involved in responding to the choices of men. He is. That's what makes His sovereignty so marvelous: He can work things after the counsel of His own will, even when they are the free choices of billions of men and angels. God may know exactly what is going to happen, but that set future is made up of the free choices of people, it is influenced by the prayers of people, by the repentance of people, by the wickedness and hardness of people.

5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: 6 "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the LORD. "Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! 7 "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, 8 "if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. 9 "And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, 10 "if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it. 11 "Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the LORD: "Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good.'"" (Jer 18:5-11)

Here is the heart of God on display. Who does God want to have mercy upon?

23 "Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord GOD, "and not that he should turn from his ways and live? (Eze 18:23)

9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2Pe 3:9)

God's heart says – I wish all to be saved. God's sovereignty says, I will make sure not all are lost. God's love says, I desire that every man would repent. God's greatness says, I will intervene far enough to make sure some do.

When we think of God's heart for the cruel, wicked, violent, evil Assyrians, and we think of the hard, cold, self-centred heart of Jonah, which are we more like? What comes into our hearts as we see the millions plunging deeper into their sin?

Do we reflect a Jonah - “hope you all get what you deserve” or a Christ, “How often I wanted to gather you to myself, but you would not.”? God's heart says, “Yes, Johannesburg deserves judgement, but the Son of God has already borne the judgement of the people here, if they will but repent and receive.”

Spurgeon: “Oh, my brothers and sisters in Christ, if sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies; and if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay, and not madly to destroy themselves. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.”