

Jonah 1 and 3

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me your Bibles to the book of Jonah, Jonah chapter 3, Jonah chapter 3.

I'd like to look with you at this passage this morning under the title, God is gracious. God is gracious. The story of Jonah is well known.

Jonah is an Israelite prophet who is commissioned by God to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh and warn its inhabitants of impending judgment.

Jonah refuses God's commission. He disobeys God's call. Instead of setting out for Nineveh, he goes to Tarshish.

He goes down to Joppa where he finds a ship bound for Tarshish. He pays his fare. He boards the ship and heads west instead of east.

[1 : 12] But the ship runs into a dreadful storm and Jonah recognizes that the storm is divine retribution for his disobedience.

When he's challenged by the sailors, he asks to be thrown overboard. Miraculously, he's swallowed by a great fish.

And he spends three uncomfortable days in its belly. There he turns to God in grateful prayer before being vomited out onto dry land.

But the book of Jonah is more than about Jonah. It's also about God.

It's God who commissions Jonah to go to Nineveh. It's God who brings about the storm. It's God to whom the pagan sailors end up praying and offering sacrifices.

[2 : 18] It's God who arranges for the great fish to swallow Jonah. It's to God that Jonah prays when he's in the belly of the fish.

And it's God who makes the fish deposit Jonah on dry land. We see how God is sovereign. He's in control of all that happens.

And he's gracious. He graciously rescues Jonah from drowning. He graciously brings the pagan sailors into relationship with himself.

And here in chapter 3, we see how the focus is very much on God. We see his sovereignty and his grace as he shows mercy and kindness to the undeserving Jonah.

And to the undeserving Ninevites. You could say that the chapter divides into four main movements.

[3 : 25] First of all, we have God recommissioning Jonah. God recommissions Jonah. That's verses 1 and 2. Then, secondly, Jonah proclaims God's judgment.

That's verses 3 and 4. Thirdly, the Ninevites respond. That's verses 5 to 9. And fourthly and finally, God relents.

That's verse 10. First of all then, God recommissions Jonah. 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. When God commissioned Jonah the first time, he disobeyed.

He flouted God's call. God was under no obligation to give Jonah a second chance. God could have sidelined him.

[4 : 38] As far as this particular mission to Nineveh was concerned, God could have said to Jonah, you've had your chance, you've had your chance, you disobeyed me, you refused to do my will.

You've deprived yourself of the privilege of serving me in this particular capacity. I can get others to do my bidding. God could have sidelined Jonah.

But he didn't. He gave him a second chance. He recommissioned him. And this time Jonah obeyed. Because he'd learned the important lesson that he might wave his puny fist in God's face.

But ultimately, he could not frustrate God's will. Jonah was a believer. He was a follower of the living and true God.

That's what he told the pagan sailors when they asked him in chapter 1. He said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

[5 : 51] Jonah knew that his God was the God of the universe. The one who had created everything. But that hadn't stopped him flagrantly disobeying God's will.

There's a story told about the great American evangelist D.L. Moody. He was on one occasion addressing a church full of children at a children's meeting in Edinburgh.

And during the course of his address, he asked the rhetorical question, What is sin? He wasn't expecting an answer. But in those days, most children knew the shorter catechism.

And they knew that what is sin was one of the questions in the catechism. So with one voice, and much to Moody's surprise, the children all chanted back, Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.

That's still a very good answer to the question, what is sin? It reminds us that sin is when we don't do what God tells us to do, as well as when we do what God tells us not to do.

[7 : 24] Well, here, Jonah did not do what God told him to do. And yet God was gracious to him. He showed him compassion.

He didn't write him off. Far from it, he gave him a further opportunity to do what he should have done in the first place.

I'm sure that's something which should encourage all of us who call ourselves Christians. We remain sinners for as long as we live.

We're all too conscious that we don't always go God's way. Sometimes, indeed, like Jonah, we sin with what the Bible calls a high hand.

But God is gracious. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. The blood of the Lord Jesus Christ goes on cleansing from all sin.

[8 : 30] When we come to the Lord in repentance, we're assured of forgiveness. God doesn't write us off. Even serious sin, if it is confessed, can be forgiven.

There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin. There's a door that is open. God can restore the years which the locusts have eaten.

God has eaten. Because he's the God of the second, the third, and the umpteenth chance. We see here how God was particularly gracious to Jonah.

Because he gave him a fresh opportunity to be his messenger to Nineveh. In Jonah's case, God, as it were, restored factory settings.

He doesn't always do that. If God asks us to do something and we don't do it, that particular opportunity may not come our way again.

[9 : 49] It doesn't mean that God won't use us in other ways in the future. But it does mean that we miss out on that particular opportunity. And we may have to live with any consequences of our sin.

And we need to remember that although God is gracious, we must not presume on his grace.

We must never allow ourselves to think that sin doesn't matter. All sin is serious. If we don't see sin as serious, it has to be that we have an inadequate view of God.

We mustn't take his willingness to forgive for granted. Sin is a contradiction of all that he is.

On the other hand, we shouldn't despair. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

[11 : 09] This morning, we can draw encouragement from the fact that if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one.

In his mercy, God graciously recommissions Jonah. Secondly, in verses 3 and 4, we see how Jonah proclaims God's message of judgment to the Ninevites.

Verse 3 gives us the burden of Jonah's message. Or rather, verse 4. Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Jonah no doubt had more to say than that. He would have put God's judgment in context.

He would have explained why Nineveh was to be destroyed. History tells us that the Ninevites were notorious for their ruthlessness and their cruelty. They didn't worship God and they didn't share or reflect his compassion.

[12 : 30] Jonah's message was one of judgment. It was in many ways an apparently negative message. But it was also potentially at least a gracious message.

You see, God could have summarily destroyed Nineveh. He needn't have given the Ninevites any warning. He needn't have given them notice of what was about to happen. In effect, he was giving them opportunity to repent of their sins and turn to him.

The king of Nineveh and the nobles grasp this. Look at what they say in verses 8 and 9.

Who knows?

God may turn and relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. Who knows?

[13 : 37] God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish. That's a perceptive comment.

The king and the nobles saw there was at least a possibility that if the people took on board God's warning, if they acknowledged their sin and pleaded for mercy, judgment might just be averted.

It isn't clear that Jonah made a point of encouraging the Ninevites to think that way. He'd cast himself in God's mercy when he was thrown into the raging sea and was in imminent danger of drowning.

But there's no evidence that he actually encouraged the Ninevites to call on God in the face of impending judgment. We see in verse 4 how Jonah was actually very angry when God showed mercy to the Ninevites.

All along, Jonah had suspected it was God's plan to have mercy on the Ninevites. And he didn't approve. He thought the Ninevites deserved all they got. But God is a God who saves.

[14 : 59] And the message of judgment, which God commissioned Jonah to bring to the Ninevites, was a message which encouraged them to appeal to God while there was yet time.

And it's interesting that what the king of Ninevites and the nobles say mirrors what the ship's captain says in verse 6 of chapter 1. When the captain awakens Jonah, rouses him from sleep and says, How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God.

Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish. At that point, the ship's captain was a stranger to Jonah's God. But he realized, he recognized that in a dire situation, there was nothing to be lost by pleading for God's mercy.

Both the king and the ship's captain saw a glimmer of hope in the face of impending disaster.

Jonah's warning of imminent judgment sounded unconditional. But the king and the nobles were right to see that it held open the possibility that God might be merciful.

[16 : 27] The Ninevites had 40 days in which to do business with God. More than the king knew, God's message through Jonah was motivated by compassion.

There was good news wrapped up in the bad news. Let's think about that for a moment.

For the Christian gospel is like that. The gospel is good news. That's what gospel means. Good news. But it's good news in the context of bad news.

We can only truly understand that the gospel is good news if we take on board the bad news. Think of that well-known verse, John 3, verse 16.

It's often used as a summary of the gospel. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but should have eternal life.

[17 : 33] God loved the world. He offers us eternal life in his son. That's good news. But why did the father have to send his son?

Why do we need eternal life? Why do we need to believe in Jesus? Because otherwise we would perish. Left to ourselves, we would end up in hell.

Cut off from God and from all that's good forever. We have been created in the image of God to live to his glory, to live in fellowship with him.

But we have rebelled against him and so have incurred his righteous judgment. Our sin is an affront to him. It's the contradiction of all that he is and he must punish it.

He cannot simply sweep it under the carpet. Left to ourselves, we are heading for inevitable and inescapable judgment. We're destined for hell.

[18 : 41] Where God's wrath is fully unleashed on impenitent sinners. The Bible speaks of God as a consuming fire.

It says that it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. That's bad news.

That's very bad news. And we need to take it seriously if we're to appreciate the good news of the gospel.

But there is good news. In his love and mercy, God has devised a way for the penalty due to us for our sin to be paid. His son, the Lord Jesus, took on flesh.

He entered our world as our representative and substitute. He lived the sinless life we should have lived. He died the death which we deserve to die.

[19 : 43] When he died on our Roman cross, he bore God's wrath against sin. He paid the price in full and defeated sin and death and the devil.

That's why he was raised to life again and can offer forgiveness and eternal life to all who put their trust in him.

You see, it's the bad news that makes sense of the good. It's the bad news that explains why the good news is such good news. And it's the bad news that underscores the urgency of the gospel.

We need to flee from the wrath to come. Can I ask you this morning, have you faced up to the bad news?

The Christian message is more than an ethical code. It's a wake-up call alerting us to coming judgment and the only way to escape it.

[20 : 50] Jesus wasn't simply a great teacher or a great example. He was God in human form, come on a rescue mission. There is salvation in no one else.

For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

And if you are a Christian, does the gospel you share with others include the bad news as well as the good? It's not easy these days to hold to a biblically balanced gospel.

Our culture shies away from what it regards as negative messages. We're expected to be positive and upbeat. In our colleges and universities, there are attempts being made to create safe spaces where nothing is said that might cause folk offence or alarm.

But is that really loving? If people are in danger, isn't it the loving thing to warn them? The gospel we present must be balanced.

[22 : 03] It must reflect the bad news as well as the good. Jonah proclaims God's message of judgment.

Thirdly, we see how the Ninevites respond. Look with me at verse 5. The Ninevites believed God.

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

These are remarkable words. The pagan Ninevites accepted that the message which Jonah conveyed came from the living and true God.

They were convicted by the message and they acted on it. The whole community fasted and put on sackcloth, showing they repented of their sins.

[23 : 15] The sins which merited God's judgment. And an edict was issued by the king and the nobles commanding the people to call out mightily to God.

Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. There was a citywide turning to God.

As Jonah proclaimed God's message, God's word accomplished God's purposes. The power of God's word was demonstrated as the entire community was impacted for good.

Down through history there have been instances of God's word affecting whole communities. Think of the effect of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, when some 3,000 people were added to the church in Jerusalem.

Nearer our own time in June 1630, a celebrated revival took place in Schotts in Lanarkshire. A young probationary minister, the Reverend John Livingston, preached a sermon in the churchyard there.

[24 : 31] And it's reckoned that some 500 people were converted. The 18th century evangelist George Whitefield is arguably the greatest evangelist that Britain has ever produced.

When the pulpit of Bristol were closed against him, Whitefield started preaching in the open air.

He preached in nearby Kingswood to hardened coal miners as they came up out of the pits. Their faces blackened with coal.

On the first day, about 200 miners gathered round. And as he preached, Whitefield noticed pale streaks on the cheeks of some of them.

As tears fell from their eyes. They asked him to come back the following day to speak to their friends and families. And within days, Whitefield was preaching to crowds estimated at 20,000.

[25 : 41] When God chooses, his power can accompany his word in such a way that whole communities are gripped and influenced. Here in the West, we haven't seen that happen for many years.

But God can do it again. And we pray that he will. Jonah's message came with real power to the hearts of the Ninevites.

They believed God. They hadn't heard about him before. But they took him at his word. And they pleaded for mercy. Can I ask you, how are you responding to God's word in the gospel?

It may be that you're hearing it for the first time. Or you may be hearing it for the 101st time. But the question is, are you taking it seriously?

Can it be said of you what was said of the Ninevites? They believed God. Fourthly and finally, we see how God relents.

[26 : 56] 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.

In response to their wholehearted repentance, God was merciful to the Ninevites. And he did not destroy their city. Disaster was averted.

When the Ninevites turned from their evil ways and sought his mercy, God relented. Human actions and decisions are real and have consequences.

That's something we need to grasp. God promises to reveal himself to those who earnestly seek him. Jesus promises not to turn away anyone who comes to him.

If we repent of our sin, if we stop going our own way and start going God's way and put our trust in the Lord Jesus, we shall be saved. That's all we need to know.

[28 : 00] If we do our part, we can be sure that God will do his. Jonah's rescue by means of a great fish was an amazing miracle.

But it was an even greater miracle that God, in his mercy, saved an entire city from destruction.

He did that because he is gracious. He's a God who cares for lost people. He graciously recommissioned Jonah.

He graciously warned the Ninevites of impending judgment and brought them to repentance. No wonder the hymn writer put it like this.

Who is a pardoning God like thee? Or who has grace so rich and free? Or who has grace so rich and free? In wonder lost with trembling joy, we take the pardon of our God.

[29 : 14] Pardon for sins of deepest dye. A pardon sealed in Jesus' blood. Who is a pardoning God like thee?

Or who has grace so rich and free? Shall we pray? Our gracious God, we pray that we may take on board the bad news.

That we may recognize that we are sinners who stand under your judgment in and of ourselves. But may we grasp the good news of the gospel.

That there is forgiveness with you. That you are a gracious God. A God who has made provision for our need in the person of your Son.

May it be true of each one of us. That we put our trust in him. That we can say, upon a life I did not live.

[30 : 28] Upon a death I did not die. Another's life. Another's death. I stake my whole eternity. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.