



Sunday, July 14, 2024

Jonah 3

As we have seen over the past few weeks, Jonah is a well seasoned prophet of God, who is called to deliver a message of repentance to the wicked city of Nineveh. It's a message he does not want to deliver, not because he is afraid of what the Ninevites will do to him, but because he is afraid that they will repent if they receive the gospel message. As we have learned, Jonah would much prefer that the city of Nineveh fall to their pending judgement than to be saved by the Grace of Almighty God. He is so fixated on his position that he runs the opposite way and boards a ship heading to Tarshish. On that ship, a massive storm hits and it is determined that Jonah was the cause. They throw him overboard and as he is sinking to the depths of the sea, he cries out to the Lord, and Almighty God rescues him by sending a massive fish to gobble him up. Jonah spends three days and nights in the belly of the beast and although we don't know if he was conscious or not during that whole period of time, we know enough to see that he finally concedes to God and prays a prayer of repentance and reconciliation. He is finally at the place where he will submit his will to the will of God and enter into the city and preach the word that God has given him to preach. It is at this point that the giant fish vomits him up onto dry land.

That took us to the end of Chapter 2, but before we get into chapter 3, I want to take a few moments to reflect on the incredible gift of grace that God has shown towards Jonah here. You see, it's easy for us to fall into the trap of only viewing God as righteous judge, but over the past few chapters, we've been able to see an incredible view of God as gracious and kind. That in the face of deliberate disobedience and willful denial, He would still extend grace towards Jonah and allow him to experience the same kind of grace that He wanted to pour out on wicked Nineveh. This is so significant because in experiencing this kind of grace himself, it actually helped to soften Jonah's hardened heart and encourage him to finally step into obedience. Yes, the goal is always first time obedience - it's what I try and teach my kids and it's what God is trying to teach Jonah and us. However, isn't it beautiful to see that there is great grace for the journey and process that it takes for many of us to get there. Don't abuse that grace, but let it motivate us towards living lives of further obedience and devotion to Almighty God.

So now as we turn our attention to chapter 3, we see that Jonah has finally relented and has started to make his way to Nineveh.

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'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.

Now the first thing I want to see is that in the opening verse of chapter 3 we see that God gives Jonah a second chance. I want you to notice that the call and the message is exactly the same as it was when he first call Jonah in chapter 1. This is important because as much as Jonah try to run from the call, try to get out of the call. Ultimately, it was Jonah who had to change not God. Even though it was an incredibly hard thing that God was asking of Jonah, and even in his persistence to try and escape, we must understand that God did not change. It was Jonah who had to change. And change he did. After sinking to the bottom of the sea; being gobbled up by a massive fish; spending three days in fermenting rotting insides and then being spat out onto dry land, you bet, Jonah was willing to change. And so, off to Nineveh he goes - probably with his tail between his legs.

And the next thing thing we learn is that the city of Nineveh is a great city and Jonah takes three days to travel it. Although it seems that these two descriptions are connected, it's important to understand that that's not necessarily the case here. At first glance it seems that Jonah is saying that

because Nineveh is so great in size, it takes 3 days just to travel through it. However, the challenge with that is that the city of Nineveh was only around 7 square kms. Given the average walking speed of 4-5 km/hr you're looking at a 2-3 hour trip max. And so we need to understand that the term 'great' here doesn't necessarily mean size but influence. And this we know to be true of Nineveh because as the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire, Nineveh was known for its immense power and influence in the ancient world .

Since this is the case, how do we then reconcile the three day journey in a city that would only take hours to go through? Is this number symbolic or literal? Well, let's follow the progression of the writing so far. We've already determined that this story is a very literal story and that the fish that swallowed Jonah was a very literal fish and the time of 3 days spent in the belly was literal - as it was meant as a foretaste of Jesus death and resurrection. And so due to the literal nature of the writing, it doesn't make literary sense for the writer to then switch to a figurative or symbolic style in the middle of the book. The three days that Jonah took to tour the city was literal and significant. Let me walk you through it:

The term '3 days' here actually refers to a three day protocol that the people of the ancient world had adapted from an ancient oriental practice of hospitality. When dignitary's or ambassadors or even prophets would enter a new city with a specific purpose in mind, they would follow this three day protocol. The first day was for the announcement of their arrival; the second day was to engage in the primary purpose of their visit and then the third day was for their farewell and return. Now, even though the people of Nineveh were a wicked, wicked people, much like almost every other city at that time, it's important to understand that they still had a very strong spiritual perspective on life. Even though they didn't worship Jehovah God, they still embraced various other gods in many aspects of their daily lives. In fact, if we fast-forward to the NT for just a moment, we see a vivid picture of this exact concept with the Apostle Paul when he visits Athens and sees the myriads of statues of gods that were represented there - even a stature of an unknown god. They were so afraid of displeasing the gods that they had made a statue to an unknown god just to make sure that they weren't forgetting anyone and were in good standing in the cosmos. And so, even though Nineveh obviously didn't worship Jehovah God, they definitely had a strong god-concept.

And so because of this, when a prophet came in the name of god, they were actually inclined to give him and his god a hearing instead of just kicking him out. And so, through this line of reasoning Jonah would have entered Nineveh as an official "ambassador," (Wiseman) on behalf of Jehovah God, who on the first day - tells the city who he is and why he has come. And the second day - he would then go about his appointed task - to preach his message of repentance. Third day - he would leave

bidding them a formal farewell.

The point being that for Jonah - on the first day when he was just introducing himself and telling them that they were headed for destruction, all of a sudden the people started to listen. We don't know the entirety of Jonah's message, but we do know that the Gospel message was preached and it was a very sobering message. All we are privy to is the opening line which spells certain doom for the Ninevites if they don't turn from their wicked ways.

I want you to hear the offensive nature of this message: 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' How in the world could Jonah walk into a city with such political and military stature and not get run out of town for saying that? We've all seen the guys downtown with the bullhorns yelling out similar messages and the vast majority of the people at least in our cities, simply don't listen. They either just ignore or avoid them - sometimes even yell back at them. But notice that's not the case here - not even close. In fact, it's the complete opposite. Instead of running Jonah out of town, they run towards him and start accepting salvation in droves! So much so that even the king hears of this and instead of trying to control and manipulate the situation he too concedes and surrenders to the God of Jonah. He even goes as far as to put in a decree for the people to fast and put on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of their repentance. And thus Jonah's 3-day visit resulted in over 120,000 people turning their hearts back to God in repentance.

It's important to know, however that this is not a typical biblical response in such situations. Even Jesus, Himself did not receive such a welcoming reception when was on the earth. Neither did Paul and Barnabas in Lystra where the crowds turned violent and tried to stone Paul. Even the Apostle Stephen, when he called the religious leaders of the day to repentance they too turned violent and stoned him...to death. This pattern of rejection is a recurring theme throughout the Bible where prophets and apostles were often met with hostility and violence when delivering God's message. Prophets like Jeremiah, Elijah, and Amos, and especially John the Baptist faced all severe opposition and persecution. Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern, Elijah was threatened by Queen Jezebel, Amos was told to leave Israel and prophesy elsewhere, and John the Baptist was imprisoned and eventually beheaded for preaching repentance.

This is the biblical norm.

But why? Why is the rejection of the Gospel message more common compared to its acceptance?

Because ultimately, at its very core, the Gospel message is inherently offensive. It carries the mes-

sage that you and I are not good enough on our own and we need help. To receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ, one must first move through the offense it causes. This journey from offense to faith is the miracle of every person who submits their hearts to Jesus Christ. Therefore, the real miracle in the book of Jonah is that the whole city of Nineveh moved past offense and came to faith.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to see a whole city turn from their wicked ways and repent? What an outstanding moment in history - something the world had never seen the likes of before! And it begs the question why this single story of complete widespread acceptance from the top down actually took place when the biblical norm was one of rejection and resistance. Answers span the spectrum on this one but the one that seems to be the most compelling for me is that the state of Nineveh at that time was very, very precarious. Sure it was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, but as we learned last week, historically during this time, it was literally 40 days from imploding. Everything was crashing down - from the weight of internal strife, economic difficulties, and threats of take-over from other cities. Add to that the fact that they had just gone through a solar eclipse and being a 'spiritual' society, viewed this cosmic scene as an omen that they were doomed. They were at their lowest and in many ways, preparing for the pending doom. And then Jonah shows up with a message from his God that would offer them hope. And so they responded with an incredible and unprecedented act of city-wide repentance that was spear-headed by the king himself. The point being that they were at the end of their ropes. They had hit rock-bottom and could see no other way out. Their hearts were softened. And if you think about it, it's exactly what Jonah just went through himself. At the bottom of the sea, as the seaweed was entangling his head, he cried out to God and God rescued him - reminding us that often, it is in our darkest, most desperate moments that we become open to true change. This was the case with Jonah and now the case with Nineveh as they repent, change their wicked ways, and avoid the judgment that was heading their way.

Which seems like a complete and utter success story for Nineveh doesn't it?

We really don't hear much about Nineveh after the book of Jonah so I did a little bit of research to figure out what happened to them. I fully expected to read of a legacy of repentance and transformation, a city that had turned over a new leaf and became a beacon of light for Jehovah God.

However, what I found was quite the opposite.

Despite their brief moment of repentance, Nineveh eventually fell back into its old ways. The city returned to its practices of idolatry, violence, and oppression. Within a few decades, the spiritual and

moral reforms that had been initiated during Jonah's time were all but forgotten. In 612 BC, the city was destroyed by a group of Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians thus pronouncing a bitter end to the Assyrian Empire.

It's heartbreaking because even though Nineveh experienced a moment of repentance, it evidently did not result in long-term transformation. And so, this story serves as a sobering reminder that initial repentance must be followed by discipline and discipleship. Without ongoing spiritual growth and transformation, even the most dramatic of conversions can falter.

And so, ultimately, knowing what we now know about the ill-fated Nineveh, it begs the question:

What is the point of this story if they were just going to self-destruct anyways?

To remind us that no matter how wicked a generation/city/people might be, God's desire for all humanity is ultimately repentance instead of judgment. He loves us - He really, really does. We see this all throughout the Scriptures:

Romans 10:13

'For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

2 Peter 3:9

'The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.'

God was incredibly patient with Jonah and even Nineveh and even though Nineveh chose to repent they did not choose to live a life of repentance and discipline and ultimately turned back to their wicked ways. This tells us that they lacked discipleship. True repentance is more than a one-time act; it requires ongoing commitment, accountability, and ultimately a transformation of the heart that impacts daily behaviour.

The apostle Paul likens this journey to a race that requires endurance and persistence - that the race of life in Christ should be viewed more-so as a marathon instead of a sprint. Just as physical fitness requires consistent effort and dedication, spiritual growth requires the same. Discipline and discipleship are key.

Along that vein, I remember listening to a trainer once say that there are all types of people that go

to the gym but generally two types of people that stand out: One is the person that goes, works out, and leaves saying, "Because I went to the gym, now I can eat and do whatever I want." The other type of person goes to the gym, works out, and when they leave, they decide not to eat or do those things that they had once done before. The difference between the two is that the first person uses the gym as a way to justify their life whereas the second person uses the gym as a way to change their life.

I think that this is the heart of discipleship for us as Christians. Are we using our spiritual practices to justify continuing in our old ways, or are we allowing them to bring transformation as they are intended to?

For example, some people show up to church on a Sunday and think that simply being present is enough to justify their actions during the rest of the week. They may go to church, participate in the service, and then return to their old habits without any real change taking place. But that's not why we go to church at all. It's not about checking a box or earning a free pass for our actions. It's about coming together as a community to encounter the presence of God and to be transformed by His word. We go to grow deeper in our relationship and knowledge of Jesus so that He can continue to shape us and mold us into the men and women of God that He is calling us to be. True discipleship means committing to a continuous journey of growth and change, aligning our lives to the very Word and nature of Jesus Christ and being willing to change our lifestyle instead of justify it. This is what the people of Nineveh neglected to do. We can learn from their ultimate demise that repentance isn't a one-time thing - it's a lifestyle - and it's that lifestyle that leads to true transformation. Changing our actions and behaviours isn't just a spur of the moment decision either. It's calculated and doesn't just happen once - it happens all throughout our lives. True transformation requires ongoing discipline and a willingness to be continually molded by God's great love, grace and mercy.

So, if you are ever wondering why we emphasize spiritual disciplines and discipleship so much it's because we're not just interested in giving you a smoke and light show on Sunday mornings we are far more interested in being a church that is known for its mature disciples of Jesus Christ. We want to see each of you deepen your relationship with God, develop a strong foundation in your faith, and be equipped to withstand the challenges and trials of life. Spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible study, worship, and service help cultivate a lasting and transformative faith. Our goal is to foster a community where believers are not only followers of Christ but also leaders and mentors who can guide others on their spiritual journeys.

It's the story of the rich young ruler isn't it?

In this story, this dignitary approaches Jesus and seemingly humbly asks what he must do for salvation - all the while knowing that he had been following the commandments since childhood. His expectation was that Jesus would say - you're good to go, but Jesus doesn't. Jesus peers deep into his soul and touches his heart by revealing that He knows what His true desire is. Deep down he may do all the right things, say all the right words, follow all the right commands but he's only doing them so that he can justify his selfish wealthy life. Jesus sees right through this and tells him to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor and then follow Him. He could not and walked away saddened because his wealth was more important to him than true discipleship.

You see, following Jesus requires more than superficial obedience; it demands a heart fully surrendered to God's will and a lifestyle that reflects that commitment every day. We must be willing to let go of anything that holds us back and embrace the life that leads to true, lasting transformation knowing that it is through this ongoing process of growth and change and submission that we become the true disciples that Jesus is calling us to be.

Points to consider as we close:

Some of us, like Jonah, or trying to avoid the hard elements of discipline that God might be asking and requiring of us. Our hope is that God will change his request or call so that we don't have to, but the realization now is that God does not change, it is us who need to change.

For some of us, we've been Christians for years but we're not seeing any real transformation. It that's you, you have to ask yourself the question if you're using your faith as a means to justify the things that God might be asking you to change that you don't want to. You may say things like: 'I go to church every sunday; I serve every month; I tithe and I wear a Jesus shirt at work, so it's okay if I hold onto certain sins or unhealthy behaviours. After all, it's really not that bad. This is a slippery slope and like Nineveh - if given enough time will ultimately lead to destruction. For you, start using your faith and relationship with God as a tool to align your life with Him instead of justifying the things that you want to hold on to.

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