

The Work of God: Sermons from Jonah
Jonah 3
God's Mission – The Road of Repentance
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Recap

It's great to be back from a break to continue exploring the book of Jonah with you. Let's recap the story so far and then I want to tell you about the new Barbie movie.

The book of Jonah begins with God commanding his seasoned prophet Jonah to go to the pagan city of Nineveh to preach against their violent and evil ways. But Jonah doesn't want to do that, so he attempts to sail 2,500 miles in the opposite direction. But God was not going to let Jonah's disobedience go unpunished, so he sends a storm that puts Jonah's boat in jeopardy. The sailors of the boat don't know how they're going to survive but they eventually discover that the storm is Jonah's fault. They don't want to throw him overboard to stop the storm, but Jonah agrees to it, probably thinking he has definitely escaped now. They throw him over, the storm subsides, the sailors bring praise to God, and God mercifully sends a big fish to swallow Jonah up and rescue him.

Inside the fish, Jonah is very uncomfortable and has a lot of time to think about all that has happened. So, in chapter 2, we read Jonah's prayer as he finally calls out to God and makes peace with him. Then God commands the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land.

And that lands us at the start of chapter 3 where God wonderfully restores Jonah to his original commission: 'the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.' This time Jonah obeys God, and he heads to Nineveh with God's word. Nineveh is a large city and an important city to God so Jonah diligently makes his way around, street by street, with the warning of God's impending judgment if Nineveh don't repent of their wickedness. And Nineveh was a truly evil city. The Assyrian's were infamous for their cruelty and brutality. You might think that such a disreputable city might laugh in Jonah's face or rough him up or even worse but astonishingly they believe God's words and they repent! Every single person in the city fasts and puts on sackcloth. Even the king gets involved, and he issues a citywide decree stressing to his people the need to grieve their sin, to turn from their evil, and to call on God in the hopes he will show pity on them.

Chapter 3 then finishes with this fantastic verse of God's great grace. '*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.*' Jonah has obeyed, God's word has gone to Nineveh, and the Ninevites have been forgiven.

Introduction

Now you're wondering what the link between Barbie and Jonah is, and maybe why I would want to watch this new film? And your confusion would be completely justified. With its ridiculous amount of pink and its main character being a children's doll, Barbie appears to be a film designed for young girls, rather than adult men. But let me read you the synopsis for

the film: 'Barbie suffers a crisis that leads her to question her world and her existence.' A comedy about Barbie having an existential crisis is right up my street, and, having seen it twice now, I can confirm it is too deep for children. It is not what it looks like on the surface.

And that is the same with Jonah chapter 3. On the surface, chapter 3 is a nice, happy ending. What a wonderful little children's tale of God's reluctant prophet – Jonah runs away but is saved, then he goes to Nineveh and the people of Nineveh are saved, happy day.

But we still have one more chapter to go. This is not the end of the story. And if this is not the end of the story, then the book of Jonah cannot be solely about Nineveh's or Jonah's redemption. And this is where we jump forward to Matthew 12 that Pete introduced to us last week. Jonah is referred to in a couple of other places in the Bible and amazingly he is mentioned by Jesus himself. It's these words from our saviour's mouth that are so key to understanding chapter 3, and the book as a whole.

Let's read Matthew 12:38-41 again.

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." ³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For 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. ⁴¹ 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.

The Israelites of Jesus' day were stubborn and hard-hearted. Despite all the miracles that Jesus demonstrated, they still demanded a sign from heaven that he was truly the Messiah. So, Jesus rightly rebukes them. They had been given all they need and would be given the Sign of Jonah: '*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.*' And then we know he came back to life confirming his messiahship.

It is also key to note verse 41: '*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.*' In his rebuke of the Jews' unbelief, Jesus highlights the improbable repentance of an overwhelmingly evil and unbelieving nation. Jesus says that Nineveh's repentance should confront the Israelites' unrepentance.

This gives us an insight into the book's original intention. The book of Jonah is part of the Old Testament that Jesus studied as a young Jewish man so it can't have been written solely for this moment in Matthew, it must have been shared with the Israelite people and established into their canon much earlier. Baring this in mind, let's remember the state of Jonah's Israel. An idolatrous and unrepentant nation that God sent the prophets Hosea and Amos to as well! So, we conclude, the book of Jonah must be written, first and foremost, as a challenge towards the unrepentance of Jonah's own Israel despite them knowing God intimately. Chapter 3 is not simply a happily ever after. Chapter 3 is part of that challenge against unrepentance, for Jonah's generation, for Jesus' generation, and for us today.

I'm going to break the story down into 3 parts this morning: in v1-4 we see Jonah restored, in v5-9 we see Nineveh repent, and in v10 God relents. But I'm going to work from the bottom up, which I promise will make more sense. I'm going to start with God making his saving will clearly known in verse 10. Then we'll move to Nineveh's model of repentance, and we'll finish with Jonah's example of life after initial repentance.

God relents

So, God relents. Let me read the wonderful words of verse 10 again. *'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.'*

This is one of God's greatest desires. This is his mission. This is the purpose of sending Jesus. This is the purpose of the Bible. God wants all people to repent from their evil ways, to return to him, to follow his way rather than our own, and to enjoy unity with him now and forever. He does not want to bring us righteous punishment for our wrongdoing. 2 Peter 3:9 says, *'he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.'* He is more than pleased to relent from destruction. Joel 2:13 says, *"Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity."*

How wonderful it is that our God has this good character. I loved how worshipful and gospel centred Pete's sermon on chapter 2 was. The book of Jonah really does present God in all his glory from his sovereign authority to his mighty power to his deep forgiveness and his vast love.

But we are left with this question, why did God threaten destruction in the first place? If he is patient, slow to anger, and does not want anyone to perish, why would he seemingly condemn Nineveh to ruin? Why send Jonah to preach destruction?

I found this illustration helpful. Normally shouting is considered an extreme or intense response and usually associated with anger and negativity. But if your child ran out into the middle of the road, you wouldn't whisper a warning. You would scream at the top of your voice to protect your child from the danger of the vehicles. The child might be upset but upon their safe return they would understand the intensity of your cries.

We are deserving of punishment for our wrongdoings. We are due the righteous requirement of God's justice. As Pete said before, who would want a judge that lets criminals off the hook? But our God is not just a fair judge, he is a merciful saviour and a loving Father. God does not proclaim judgement for fun, but as a warning designed to alter our course, reveal our greatest need, and lead us to repentance. A child would quickly discover the dangers of the road for themselves if they didn't listen to their parent's cry. In a similar way, Nineveh would have experienced God's punishment if they had remained unrepentant.

This is also why we are only given one sentence of Jonah's preaching in verse 4. As I'm sure you've picked up, the book of Jonah is concise in its style of writing, so we know that verse 4

isn't all Jonah said but it does summarise his message into a short stark warning because that is the core of what God has to say to Nineveh. As Gordon Keddie writes, 'Preaching the fear of the Lord is not nice and comforting, but it is the only way anyone ever comes to know the salvation of the Lord. Of course, the fear of God's wrath is not the whole of saving faith, but, like the plough turning the turf, it is a necessary step on the way to a fruitful harvest.'

God seeks repentance with everything he does. He lovingly warns us of the danger ahead and we have hope in his readiness to relent from punishing those who do repent. Where do we stand before God this morning? Have we asked for forgiveness for our wrongs? Are we going to heed God's warning and enjoy peace with him? 1 John 1:9 says, '*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*' This is the greatest promise known to man. If you come to God with repentance, he will forgive you.

Nineveh repents

Okay God wants me to repent but what does that look like? Look no further than Jonah chapter 3 and the model example of the Ninevites. They clearly understand the stakes here. In verse 5, they attribute Jonah's message as God's word, and they believe it. From verses 8 and 9 we can see they understand the peril they are facing, and they recognise their specific offenses.

And the Ninevites don't brush off this new information, they allow it to change their worldview, and they immediately react accordingly. That is the first thing to learn from their example. Repentance should not be lazy; it should be urgent. You don't give mould time to grow and worsen, you combat it as soon as possible. We shouldn't leave our sin to become more stubborn. We should want to put things right with God straightaway, especially if it is our first time doing so.

I have three more noteworthy features of their response. The next is their emotions. Fasting and putting on sackcloth were the actions of grief and sorrow. The king lowered himself to the dust. They genuinely feel sorry for what they have done. Again, this is not comfortable, but do we feel the sorrow of our sin? Wherever we are on your journey with God, we cannot allow ourselves to think that we should not mourn your sin. We may already be forgiven but sin is still a terrible grievance against our God, creator, and saviour. Joel 2:12 says, "*Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."*

The Ninevites don't leave their emotions just in their hearts, they put it into action. They bring their entire lives in humility before God. They change their eating habits, and they change their clothes. The king, who would usually sit on a throne in expensive garments, throws himself onto the floor and swaps his royal robes for clothes of mourning. He then issues a decree in which he cries for his people to "give up their evil ways." They even symbolically include the animals in all this to emphasise their grief. Does our repentance stay in our heart, or does it work its way into our actions? Do we U-turn on our sin? That's what repentance literally means, to turn back, to do a complete 180-degree turn. Consider

Scrooge in A Christmas Carol. He completely reverses his callousness by generously giving to the charity he had rejected earlier.

And then they pray. Their repentance is not following Jonah's instructions or an insincere spectacle to get God off their back. They have instigated a relationship with their creator, and they are seeking to make peace with him. *"Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."* (3:8-9). 'Who knows?' is not a cry of desperation but an expression of their hope in his good character. "If he saved the prophet who rejected him, and he sent us a warning message, there must be hope for us too." Repentance must involve God. It seems obvious to say but he is the one we have wronged, and it is his standard we have broken. Repentance should be a sincere stance of humility before him who promises to forgive those who return to him.

Whether we need to repent for the very first time, or we are living a reverent life of consistent repentance for our sins, this is the pattern for us to follow. Repentance is an urgent, emotional, practical, and prayerful undertaking.

Jonah restored

What then is expected of us after repentance? The next step on the road after every time we fail is obedience. In chapter 3, Jonah is a great example of God's expectations for his people but also of how he blesses them as they follow him.

Just look at how good God is to give Jonah a second chance in verses 1 and 2. Not only does he give him a second chance, but God gives him the exact same commission. He doesn't diminish his responsibility one bit. God doesn't treat Jonah as a lesser prophet because of his disobedience, and this is how God loves us. We all fail to heed God's commands, we regularly need God's word to come to us a second time, but he always gives us a second chance and doesn't hold us any lower in his eyes as a result.

Notice though that God does not save Jonah without a purpose. Jonah's second chance is to "go" again, not return to Israel for a holiday. God still wants his prophet to fulfil his mission, to take God's word to Nineveh, but now he has his own personal experience of redemption in his arsenal. The sign of Jonah in Matthew 12 goes even further than illustrating the 3-day schedule of Jesus' death and resurrection. John Mackay says, 'What Jesus and Jonah supremely had in common was that both would undergo a death-experience connected with God's judgement on sin, and both would have a miraculous deliverance from death by the power of God.' Jonah was a living example of God's deliverance to the Ninevites, to go along with the words God had given him.

Like Jonah, we are saved to serve, and to share our story. We are not saved and then taken immediately to heaven. We are not saved and then all our problems disappear. We are called to take the gospel message to all people through God's word, the Bible, and through our own experience of salvation. We are living examples of God's grace designed to give hope to a broken world. Our humility beneath God's saving grace begins with our initial

repentance but it continues into lifelong service to our saviour and sharing his good news with those who don't know it.

And Jonah is obedient to his call. We don't know what's going on in his heart, and we know from chapter 4 that he still has heart issues, but he is obedient. And, actually, that's all that matters. Where Jonah was once disobedient, he is now obedient. God didn't just rescue Jonah with the fish, he blessed him too. Jonah has grown in grace from his trial in the fish. He now knows the word of God should be first in our lives, he knows to follow God whether he agrees with him or not, he knows to choose God over his emotions, and he knows to trust the one who saved him.

There is such great encouragement to take from Jonah in this chapter. He's just a normal human being with a range of emotions and experiences and he gets things wrong, but God loves him and restores him and forgives him and gives him a second chance and then he obeys and gets things right but then he will fail again chapter 4, is that not the Christian life with all its ups and downs? It's so encouraging to see the steadfast love and forgiveness of God despite failure to obey him, but it also reminds us of our duty to be obedient. We, like Jonah, are miraculously delivered men and women with the word of God at our disposal. God may not be calling us to a Nineveh, but he has given us all a commission to obey. *"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations."* (Matthew 28:19a).

Conclusion

As I close, consider where you are on the road of repentance today.

Maybe you have never considered the danger awaiting you, or maybe you have but you brushed it aside. Then know that God is good, and he promises to save everyone if they repent. The people of Nineveh have given you the blueprints of repentance for you to work out in your life. You can and will be restored. Nineveh were, Jonah was, and God does not default on his promises. And then there is a wonderful relationship with that good God awaiting you.

Maybe you are far down the road. Repentance is not new to you, you have spent many years bringing your sin before God, and you are working out obedience in your life. If so, allow yourself to be challenged by the Ninevites' example. Am I urgent, emotional, practical, and prayerful with my repentance? Do I fully turn 180 degrees, or do I stop at 90? And remember we are saved to serve. Our repentance is not just for our own benefit, it is a sign of hope to others, it is a lighthouse to ships approaching the rocks. And don't worry if you fail. Be encouraged by the example of Jonah. If God restored him, he will forgive our failures. If Jonah could be obedient, so can we. Whether it's on the 1st, 3rd, or 50th try, we can follow God's commands, especially his commission to share the gospel.