

The Merciful God and His Confronting Message

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd be very glad if you'd turn in your Bibles to Jonah chapter 3. We've got two readings this evening, and this is the first. Jonah chapter 3, page 775 in the Blue Bibles that you may have been given on the way in.

We pick up the story in round 2. Jonah chapter 3, verse 1. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth.

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey, and he called out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And the people of Nineveh believed God.

They called for a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne. He removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

[1 : 23] And he issued a proclamation, and published through Nineveh, By the decree of the king and his nobles, let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything.

Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. And let them call out mightily to God, that everyone turn from his evil ways, and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent, and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he'd said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. Now I'd like you to turn over to Matthew chapter 12, page 817.

Matthew chapter 12, verse 38. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Jesus, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.

[2 : 51] But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation, and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

The queen of the south will rise up at the judgment with this generation, and condemn it. For she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray for a moment. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray. Again, we re-echo this prayer that you would please hear us, draw near to us.

Please speak to us. Please may we learn important things about you. And please may we be transformed in the way we think about you, and the way we live in your world.

[4 : 14] Hear us, we ask it, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Let me, please turn to Jonah chapter three. Let me start this evening by giving you a bit of working out to do.

Not the touching your toes working out. It's quite warm enough in here without any of that. I mean the Iñahid type working out. Add these two things together, if you will, and see what you get.

One, a reluctant preacher. A man taken away from a work that is going well, sent to a group of people he doesn't really like, in a place he doesn't really want to be, to do a job he doesn't really want to do.

Put that together with an unpromising 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. An unpromising audience.

[5 : 14] Bring those together in your mind for a moment. Now let me ask you this. If Nineveh were the destination of this church's next year summertime short term mission program.

Call it Hope Nineveh or something like that for a moment. If Nineveh were the destination of the church's mission program. And Jonah was the leader of the team. Would you be glad if your child or grandchild wanted to go?

To a place like that? With a team leader like that? What hope is there of a good outcome? With a preacher like that sent to a place like that?

Friends, until we face that kind of question. And face the fact that we would not let our children go. And we would not support it financially.

And we would have a major loss of confidence in our church leaders for even suggesting that sending Jonah to Nineveh would be a good thing to do. We have not begun to grasp how remarkable this chapter is.

[6 : 22] Because Hope Nineveh goes really well. And it goes well. Not because the preacher has a huge change of heart on the way.

He's not a different man. And not because the hearers suddenly become fertile soil. But only because. The God who made the sea and the dry land and everything else is.

Absolutely amazing. He is very kind indeed. And very powerful. And he's able to do wonderful things with the worst of people to the worst of people in making himself known.

Hope Nineveh is God's work. That's the only reason it goes well. Despite the wickedness of both the hearers and the missionary. And both are evidently wicked in this book.

God makes it happen. And God makes it prosper. It's an amazing chapter. Let's just look at this amazing chapter then. It's a quite well known and uncomplicated story I think.

[7 : 28] And so we'll run quite quickly through the story. And then spend a bit of time thinking about some of the implications of it afterwards. The story falls into three sections. The first section is verses 1 to 5.

I've titled this. The word of the Lord and the city of Nineveh. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time saying, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. Three days journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey.

And he called out, yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

An amazing story in a few verses. Let me make a few observations. First, notice Jonah's obedience, verse 3. Jonah arose and went.

[8 : 28] The start of chapter 3 is very like the start of chapter 1. God's word comes to Jonah. However, this time, he obeys God's word and goes where God wants him. But those of us who've been with the story from the beginning will remember his previous reluctance.

And also, his positive but rather inadequate response to God in chapter 2. And at the start of chapter 4, verse 1, again, we run into Jonah's negative response.

However, for the moment, Jonah obeys. Who would choose to do otherwise? His actions back in chapter 1 led him to the depths of the sea and the gut of a very large fish for quite a long time.

And I imagine that experience was terrifying and unpleasant enough to be well worth avoiding a second time. Jonah obeys. Second, notice Nineveh's greatness, verse 3.

Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. Now, Nineveh is one of the big cities of a hostile nation, the nation of Assyria. The territory roughly of modern Iraq today.

[9 : 33] Hostile to other nations in general. Among them, the nation of Israel. There's already been hostility and there's more to come. This passage makes absolutely nothing of that. What it does make much of is Nineveh's greatness.

Three days journey in breadth. Or a three day journey. Now, that might mean a number of things. It's probably not a statement about Nineveh's absolute size.

From what we know, I think there aren't really ancient cities of that time anywhere in the whole world that would take you three days to walk across. It might mean it took a three day visit to visit it.

Remember for a moment that Jonah is a prophet with connections at the court of Jeroboam the king back in Israel. Jeroboam was a very significant king in his day. Maybe a visiting foreigner with court connections over there gets the three day treatment in a place like Nineveh.

In other words, it's a place with enough officialdom to make a visit a somewhat laborious thing.

More likely, I think, three days is a figurative way of saying a long enough time.

[10:42] We had a similar three days thing earlier in the book when talking about how long Jonah spent in the fish. Three days and three nights. A long time. Quite long enough. Whichever of those it is, it's a big place.

And more than that, it's big to God. Look at verse three, would you please? Where it says, Nineveh was an exceedingly great city.

You'll see there's a footnote there and a more word for word translation is given at the bottom of your page. Nineveh was a great city to God.

In God's eyes, Nineveh is a significant place. And we've already had that emphasis twice in the book. Chapter one, verse two. Go to Nineveh, that great city, says God to Jonah.

Chapter three, verse two. Go to Nineveh, that great city. We'll see it again in chapter four. Verse 11. Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, says God.

[11:44] God cares about Nineveh. To him, it's great. Significant enough to bother with. It's wickedness is enough, important enough to warn it about.

If nobody warns you when you're doing wrong, it's really a sign that nobody cares about you. Never mind the damage you might be doing to others.

God cares about humanity. He even cares about Nineveh. And so he sends Jonah, verse two, to call out against it.

Why is it great to God? Well, I think this book's answer is because God is the God of the whole world. It's a very important theme in this book.

Very strong emphasis that God is the creator of everything. Chapter one, he made the sea and the dry land, says Jonah. That pretty much encompasses everything. He controls the storm.

[12:41] He controls the fish. In chapter four, he controls the plant. And even the tiny little worm that gnaws the plant. From the greatest to the smallest things, God is the maker and owner and is carefully in control.

There are many important things in the world that we human beings don't care much about.

Sometimes our lack of care is a product of our smallness. We're just too small to be able to be concerned for everything.

Sometimes our lack of care is a product of our sinfulness. Jonah care doesn't care about Nineveh because he doesn't like them much. And he's too turned in on life and ministry back home to bother about them over there.

But God is not like Jonah. And he's not like us. He's not small. And he's not sinful. We sometimes think in our worst moments that God must be much too big.

To be concerned about my little life and my little concerns. Of course, quite the opposite is true. He is big enough to be fully concerned with absolutely everything.

[13:56] It is because he is great that he cares about detail in that way. It is because he's great that no one is too obscure to escape his attention.

And nothing is too small for him to bother about. For he made everything. The land, the sea, the plant, the worm from the greatest to the smallest.

Nineveh is great in God's eyes. He cares about her evil. Third, let's look at Nineveh's response.

Jonah's message to Nineveh is strong and stark.

Verse 4, yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And Nineveh's response is quite remarkable. Verse 5, the people of Nineveh believed God.

They called for a fast. They put on sackcloth. From the greatest of them to the least of them. Notice what a confronting message this is. Overthrow is coming. It's coming.

[14:57] It's coming. 40 days you've got. It's coming. Deal with it. It is very easy to write Jonah off. But it's worth pointing out that for all his faults, he is not lacking in courage.

This is a stark message. We get more of the response in a moment. But for now, let me say that the message of God to Nineveh and to the sinful world is a sharply confronting message.

Judgment is coming. God is not your friend. You are not his friend. Judgment is coming. You'll be overthrown. Now, we're not told here of Jonah speaking any words to persuade Nineveh of how

much God loves them.

Now, I imagine that more words were spoken in the course of three days than just these ones. But for the author's purposes, this is what the reader of the book needs to hear. Nineveh needed to be persuaded that God was against her.

Now, as Jonah knows only too well, this negative message entails mercy. It brings mercy with it.

[16:08] Why would God send a messenger to warn of overthrow if he wanted the city to be overthrown? Why not sneak up in it unawares and just go wallop and blot it out? Why send a messenger if you want it to be overthrown?

Now, of course, the truth is God does not want the city to be overthrown. And Jonah knows that only too well. It brings Jonah no pleasure at all to speak this message of judgment because he would be quite happy for Nineveh to be overthrown.

But God wants Nineveh to have mercy. So he sends a prophet with a message of judgment. Now, that might seem paradoxical, but it's the way it works.

The route to mercy is a message of judgment. God is the owner, the judge. He will take account of everything. Everyone will have to give account. When we emit from our message the issue of God's coming judgment, we rob people of the route to mercy.

But Jonah passes it on faithfully. And the people respond positively. Isn't that an amazing result?

Well, let me point out the second section of this chapter.

[17:21] The first is the word of the Lord and the city of Nineveh. Second, the word of the Lord and the king of Nineveh, verses 6 to 9. The word reached the king.

And he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sacked ashes.

And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything.

Let them not feed or drink water. But let the man and beast be covered with sackcloth and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that's in his hands.

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

Now, I mentioned earlier on in our series that this is almost certainly a book written for Israelite people.

And it would be very easy, I think, for an Israelite audience looking at verse 5 to think, I don't think much of that.

[18:27] We all know what the Syrians are like. It's bound to be half-hearted. Any Israelite audience, a bit further on in history, would know exactly how grim it was to be on the receiving end of the arrogant hostility of the people of Nineveh.

Any Israelite audience knows only too well, historically speaking, Nineveh's repentance was not deep and not long-lasting. And so the author goes to some lengths to show that though it may not have led them to long-term national repentance, Nineveh's response was real.

It was a proper response and a significant one. And it's done through the description of the king.

Now, writers about this book make a big deal, a big deal of pointing out that the king's response is not all it might be.

We hear no mention of turning away from the gods of Assyria. He doesn't mention that. We hear no mention of the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel, in his words, as it is by the sailors back in chapter 1.

There's no making vows to God. There's no presenting sacrifices to God. All that stuff is rolled out against the king of Nineveh. And all of that perhaps is true, but it's quite clear from this text that this is a serious response to God.

[19:51] Isn't it? Verse 9. Who knows? God may turn and relent. There's personal humbling in this response.

He descends from his throne. He removes his royal robes and sackcloth and ashes. This is not normal behavior for kings. There's a public proclamation that similar sorts of things should be repeated everywhere.

It is not normal for major figures of authority to behave in this way and challenge to say publicly, we got it wrong. Everybody needs to know. And there is this lack of presumption in verse 9.

Let everyone turn from his evil way. Who knows? God may relent. It's not a given that God is going to take the punishment away, but he might. Now that is a remarkable response from a ruler of a

great city.

Why is it recorded in such detail? Well, I think because when verse 5 says, from the greatest of them to the least, the author wants the reader to know that he really means from the greatest to the least, including the king.

[21 : 04] This was a proper response to God's word, a fitting one, a genuine one. Notice that this response is a response to the word of the Lord. Do you notice that Jonah doesn't get a mention at all in verses 6 to 9?

He's just not there. The story could jump straight from verse 5 to verse 10 without breaking stride. Who knows if Jonah actually met the king?

We're not told. Nineveh responded well. And that sets the scene for this next little section. What happens when Nineveh responds this way?

Third section, the gracious God and his unmoved messenger. Let's look first at how God responds. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, he relented of the disaster that he said he would do to them and he did not do it.

How God's response. How God responds, well, he relents. He doesn't do what he says he'll 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 and is always changing his mind.

[22 : 18] This is not here to teach us that Nineveh's response is a surprise to God, a new development to the story, something he hadn't imagined would happen, and so he has to change his plan.

Now, right from the beginning of this story all the way to the end, it's quite clear that Jonah knows that God intends to have mercy. Even though, strictly speaking, the message is not about mercy. God has not changed his mind. Neither is this here to tell us that God doesn't mean what he says when he says it. This is not here to make us think that when God says something like, yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown, we can't be sure about whether it will happen or not.

You could come away from this thinking, how do I know if God really means what he says if he changes his mind like this? Well, let me say the whole way the words work and the way the story goes suggests that everybody knows from these words that things might go better if Nineveh responds well.

Jonah knows it. That's why he doesn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. The king knows it. He's not presuming, but he knows it's a possibility. Look at verse 9. God may turn and relent.

[23 : 37] You see, the whole thing about an advance warning is that it suggests that there might be a way out if something changes. It is very important that we don't read the Bible woodenly and press God's words into a rigidity that we wouldn't apply to our own.

Let me just illustrate a small domestic illustration. When my children were small and I said, as I quite often did, stop that. And then when they didn't stop that, I said, I will count to three and then there will be consequences.

If you wanted to look at those words woodenly, you might say, he's going to count to three and then there will be consequences. The truth is that usually I didn't get to three and there often weren't consequences.

You know, I never had one of my children say on even one occasion, changed your mind, have you? Or your words just can't be trusted.

You hardly ever do what you say you're going to do. Now, even a very small person knows that definite sounding words, definite sounding words are made sounding definite like that, precisely so that those things will not come to pass.

[25 : 12] That's why you speak the word. They're conditional. We expect that if there's a change on one side, there will also be a change on the other. Why else would you announce it in advance?

You see, God does exactly what you'd expect him to do here. He doesn't do what he said he will do. And that brings us on to how Jonah responds. Chapter four, verse one, the whole thing displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry.

God responds one way, Jonah, his messenger, another way. Jonah is very unhappy. He knew it was coming right from the beginning. That's why he didn't want to go in the first place.

Now it's come. He's very, very unhappy that it's come. This chapter finishes them with a sharp contrast between on one hand, the Lord, and on the other hand, his messenger.

A contrast that gets explored at great length in chapter four. For now, let me just make two observations. Now, guys, time to wake up.

[26 : 17] It's very warm in here. Just pinch yourself a bit and prod your next door neighbor. It's very warm. And I can see people melting all over their chairs. Time to wake up and just focus a little bit for a couple of minutes before we finish.

I've been assuming three things in this book so far. One, that this is a story that has its origins in Jonah himself. That is to say, he is the one who either wrote this story down or passed it on to somebody else to write down.

Two, that in telling the story, he knows that he was wrong to be angry and has since changed his mind. And three, that the story is told because he knows that his own people will need to learn something of what he has learned himself.

There are others who are negative towards Nineveh as he was. There are others who will be angry as he was that God might be a God who would withhold judgment from people like them.

So it's worth asking, what impact would this chapter have on an Israelite reader of this book? We often come away from this chapter, I think, thinking the big point here is that God loves the whole world and will have mercy on anyone in the whole world who repents.

[27 : 41] And of course, that's true. And it's a legitimate thing to take away from this chapter. But I think something much sharper than that is being communicated here. And it comes in two parts. Part one. What God demanded of Nineveh, God has also demanded of Israel.

You see, Israel, the nation this book is written to, is not a neutral observer of this story. Israel has behaved just like the nations round about her.

Like Nineveh, Israel has had prophets coming to her. Amos and Hosea, Jonah's contemporaries back home. They've come with warnings to Israel that she will be overthrown.

Why? Well, if you look at Hosea and Amos for her violence, for her arrogance, for her abuse of the poor, for her attitude to foreigners, for her unfaithfulness to her creator, for her idolatry.

In other words, all the same sorts of things that Nineveh is criticized for in the Bible, Israel has also been criticized for.

[29 : 01] She was supposed to be a light to her. She was supposed to be a light to the nations, distinctive in God's plan in the world. But instead, she became just like her unwilling prophet, nationalistic, turned in on her own affairs and frankly disobedient to the role that God gave her in the world.

God has said to Israel that she will be overthrown. And what God does here, I think, in sending her prophet over there to Nineveh is to hold out to Israel a mirror of her own situation.

In Jonah's message to Nineveh, Israel hears of a judgment that she does believe in. She believes that Nineveh ought to be judged. I think that's meant to remind her of a message of judgment that she has not taken seriously.

That is to say, that she will be judged. Jonah and Israel would love to see Nineveh overthrown, but can't quite believe that they will be overthrown if they do the same things as Nineveh has done. What God demanded of Nineveh, God has also demanded of Israel back home. And the second bit of this is, what Nineveh has done in response to God's word, Israel back home has not done in response to God's word.

[30 : 38] Perhaps above everything else, this passage emphasizes that Nineveh's repentance brought her relief from God's judgment.

Even if only for a while, Nineveh was spared. Israel has been warned again and again and again in much more detail of coming judgment.

But let me ask you, as far as you're aware in the Bible, has there been back in Israel, the northern kingdom, in living memory, a king getting off his throne and putting on sackcloth and ashes and calling for national repentance?

Has there been anyone like that? There has not. Has there been a nation in mourning from the greatest of them to the least? There has not.

Has there been the wonderful lack of presumption demonstrated by the king in verse 9? No, there has not.

[31 : 43] Israel, the most privileged of nations, has been dreadfully presumptuous in relation to God. She's done all the things that the world around her does and thought that it would be okay to ignore God's warnings.

The truth is that people who've been privileged in relation to God often think that they are immune to the things the rest of the world is not immune to. Jesus, speaking to the people of his day, used this story to illustrate the pride of his own people.

In his day, the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and they will condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah. They didn't have that for long.

And behold, something greater than Jonah is here. They repented, but you won't. That was Jesus' message to his generation. And I take it that this is the message of Jonah to his generation. Nineveh, they've repented. What about you? Let me close.

[32 : 53] Two brief observations. One. The God revealed in this chapter and in this book is absolutely amazing. He is kind, overflowing in kindness and patient.

So patient with the people of Nineveh to send them a prophet, even an unlikely one like this. So patient with Jonah in chapter 4. So patient with Israel, warning after warning.

He's able to do the most wonderful thing with the worst of people in making himself known. He longs that people should repent and come to know him.

He loves to have mercy on people who repent. Folks, I don't know what your situation is here this evening, but it's highly possible. There are people here this evening who think it is quite impossible that God would be interested in having someone like me, bearing in mind what I've done and who I am and how I've been, and especially perhaps how long I've held off responding to his warnings. If that's you, look at this passage and think again. God is amazingly kind and generous to anyone who turns around towards him. If you haven't yet, now's the time.

[34 : 19] If you've been putting it off for a long time, now's the time. He's very patient. He loves to have mercy to those who repent.

But notice also that if this is true about Israel, privilege and presumption often go hand in hand. Let's pray together. Just a moment in the quiet to respond ourselves to what God has said to us. Hear these wonderful words.

We thank you, gracious God, that you are overflowing in love and patience, kindness and mercy.

[36 : 20] There's no question when we look at the Bible and our world, no question at all about the wickedness that we possess as human beings. We recognize from this story and from the rest of the Bible that Nineveh was not a well-behaved city.

And neither were the people of Israel and neither was Jonah the prophet. But to all of those, you demonstrated great patience and kindness.

We thank you that that is who you are. A God of great patience and kindness. And we pray that you would help us to respond gladly to that ourselves this evening.

We pray that we might not muddle around continuing in presumption, thinking that it doesn't matter, thinking that you won't see, thinking that you don't know.

Help us rather to cling on quickly to your mercy and kindness. Deliver us, please, from being so familiar with what we know about you, that we no longer think we have to respond in obedience to you.

[37 : 37] Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.