

A Comforting Word

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[0 : 00] Please draw near to us and speak to us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Please turn to Jonah chapter 3. We're in the third of our four studies in Jonah chapter 3 this lunchtime.

You'll find that on page 775 in the Visitor's Bibles. Jonah, having been vomited out on the dry land, chapter 2 verse 10, hears again the word of the Lord.

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.

[1 : 12] 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, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in 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 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 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 he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. Let me give you a little bit of working out to do, that not the standing up and stretching your arms and bending down and touching your toes kind of working out, the kind of in your heat working out.

[2 : 32] Add these two things together and see what you come up with. First, a reluctant preacher. He's taken away from a work that's going well back home.

He's sent to a group of people he doesn't like, in a place he doesn't want to be, to a job he doesn't want to do. Add him together with, on the other hand, 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.

Let me ask you a question. If this were your church missionary project, would you be supporting Mission to Nineveh enthusiastically?

Let's bring it a bit closer to home. This is the time of year when all sorts of summertime short-term missionary programs carry on. If this were your short-term summertime missionary project, would you be glad if your child or your grandchild went on the short-term summer team to Nineveh with Jonah?

[3 : 50] A place like that and a preacher like him, what hope is there of a favorable outcome? Well, the truth is that there is every hope of a favorable outcome.

And the outcome is a good one. And the outcome is a good one because, not because the preacher is a good one, and not because the hearers are particularly fertile soil, but only because God is both gracious and powerful.

And Mission to Nineveh is his work. And he chooses to make it happen, and he chooses to make it prosper, despite the hostility of the preacher and the hostility of the audience.

Now, we're going to consider this very remarkable account over the next 20 minutes. In many ways, it's a well-known story, this, isn't it? Not a complicated one, really. We'll go quite quickly through the detail and then spend a bit of time on two less obvious implications of the story at the end.

The story falls into three sections, really, I think. Verses 1 to 5 and verses 6 to 9 and verse 10, probably on to 4, the beginning of chapter 4.

[5 : 04] Let's look briefly at the first section. First, Jonah and the city. 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. They put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. A few observations. Let's say something first about Jonah's obedience. Chapter 3, verse 2, is very like chapter 1, verse 2. Arise, go to Nineveh.

God's word comes to Jonah, but this time he obeys. We cannot forget, however, his previous disobedience and his inadequate response to God in chapter 2.

[6 : 09] Indeed, by the end of our session, we'll be running into his negative response yet again in chapter 4, verse 1. For the moment, however, he obeys. Who would choose to do otherwise? His actions back in chapter 1 led him into the depths of the sea and the gut of a large fish for quite a long time.

And I imagine that was terrifying and unpleasant enough to be worth avoiding a second time. Jonah obeys. Second, let me say something about Nineveh's greatness.

Nineveh is one of the big cities of a hostile nation. Hostile to other nations in general, among them Israel. The passage makes little of that.

What it does make much of is Nineveh's greatness. Verse 3, 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 its absolute size. From what we know, there aren't really any ancient cities of that age which would take three days to walk from one side of to the other side of.

[7 : 14] It might mean that it took a three-day visit to cover it. Remember, Jonah is a prophet connected to the court of Jeroboam, the king back in Israel.

We don't know much about that, but perhaps a visiting foreigner with court connections gets the three-day treatment in a place like Nineveh. In other words, it's a place with enough officialdom to make a three-day do of a visit from a foreigner.

But perhaps more likely, three days is just a figurative way of saying a good long time. We had a similar three-day thing earlier on in the book when talking about how long Jonah spent in the fish. Three days and three nights. Quite long enough. A long time. Whatever flavor it is, Nineveh is a great place. And more than that, it's big to God.

Look at verse three, would you? The second half. The ESV has now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. More literally, it's a city great to God.

[8 : 29] And you'll see that in the footnote in the ESV. Now, we've already had that emphasis twice in the book. Chapter one, verse two. Go to Nineveh. That great city, says God.

Chapter three, verse two. Go to Nineveh. That great city, says God. Chapter four, verse 11. Next week, we'll find it. Verse 11. Should not I pity Nineveh?

That great city. Three times it's mentioned. God cares about Nineveh. To him, it's great, significant. Important enough to bother about. It's wickedness is important enough for God to warn it about.

Why is it great to God?

Well, the only answer this book gives is that God is the God of the whole world. It's a very important theme in this book. God is the creator of everything.

[9 : 25] Chapter one, he made the sea and the dry land, says Jonah. He controls the storm. He controls the fish. Chapter four, he controls the plant that grows and the little worm that eats it up.

From the greatest to the smallest things, God is the maker and owner and carefully in control of everything. Now, there are many important things in the world that we don't care much about as individuals.

Sometimes our lack of care is simply a product of our smallness. We are too small to bother about all the things that are happening in the world. I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the bad news in the world, don't you?

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

But God is neither small nor sinful. We sometimes think that God must be much too big to be concerned about the details of life.

[10:37] Quite the reverse is true. He is concerned because he is big. If he weren't big, he couldn't bother about it all. But he's big enough to be intimately involved with everything.

It's because he's big that he cares. And nothing is too small. From the storm from the city of Nineveh to the worm that he appoints to eat the plant in chapter 4.

He made everything. Nineveh is great in God's eyes despite her evil. Her good or her evil matter to him. Third, can I say something about the response of Nineveh?

Jonah's message to Nineveh is strong and stark. Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Nineveh's response is quite remarkable.

They believed him. Isn't that a remarkable thing? Would you expect that? Imagine a wandering preacher coming to the streets of Glasgow. You'll have seen them, haven't you?

[11:40] Yet 40 days and Glasgow will be overthrown. Do you think anybody's going to believe that? You don't think anyone is going to believe that. But Nineveh believed Jonah. They took that word seriously.

Notice what a confronting word this is. Overthrow is coming. It's coming. Destruction is coming. 40 days. That's how long you've got. Deal with it. Now, friends, can I say it's quite easy to write off Jonah completely, but let me observe that for all his faults, he does not lack courage.

Difficult message to preach in a big city like this, hostile to foreigners. More of the response in a moment. For now, just let me say that the message of God to Nineveh, and indeed the message of God to the sinful world, is a strongly confronting message.

Judgment is coming. God is not your friend. You are not his. Judgment is coming.

You will be overthrown by it. Notice he does not try to persuade Nineveh of how much God loves them. They need to be persuaded that God is against them.

[13:05] Now, as Jonah knows only too well, these negative words entail mercy. Why would God send a messenger to warn of overthrow if he wanted overthrow to happen?

Why would he bother? Well, he'd just bring it on them one day without warning. Now, he doesn't want the city to be overthrown, and Jonah knows that. It brings Jonah no pleasure whatever to speak this message of judgment, because he'd be quite happy for Nineveh to be overthrown.

But God wants Nineveh to have mercy, and so he sends a prophet with a message of judgment. Let me say that the route to mercy is a message of judgment.

Do you believe that? When we omit from our message the primary issue of God's coming judgment, we rob people of the route to mercy.

I've been doing a little bit of research recently on the word inclusive. It's a very popular word in our culture. When you get home, if you have access to Google, Google inclusive church, and you will find a stack of church websites telling you how inclusive they are and how much they love the whole world.

[14:28] I'll give you a packet of Smarties if next week you can come back and say, on one of those websites, I found the words sin or judgment and Jesus being the answer to them.

See if you can find that. Very interesting, isn't it? The God who made and loves the whole world, even Nineveh, does not have a message fundamentally of inclusion, but a warning that exclusion is imminent.

Do you see? That's the route to being in. The route to being in is knowing you're on the way out and taking the appropriate measures, and God has provided the appropriate measures.

God wants Nineveh to have mercy, so he sends a prophet with a message of judgment. And Jonah passes on that message faithfully, and the city responds positively.

Isn't that an amazing thing? Second section, the word and the king. Verse six following. Very easy, I think, for an Israelite audience reading this book to think, pa, I don't think much of verse five.

[15:38] I bet that was a superficial response. Why did God let them off? And I think what we have here in verses six to nine is focusing in on one particular individual just to prove to the reader that this is not a superficial response.

Here we have the king. Now, we don't know, of course, we know, of course, that this didn't lead to long-term national repentance towards God.

Nineveh, a few decades later, became a fierce enemy of Israel and Israel's God. But at this point, this passage shows that Nineveh's response is real and significant.

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

Where is the mention of turning away from the gods of Assyria? Where is the name of the God of Israel, the Lord, Yahweh? It's not invoked here by the king as it is by the sailors back in chapter one. There's no making vows.

[16:39] There's no sacrificing. All that kind of stuff. Well, all of that's true. But at face value, this is a serious response.

He descends from his throne. He removes his royal robes. He puts on sackcloth and ashes. And a public decree goes out that similar sorts of things be repeated all over the city.

It is not normal for major public figures to behave in this manner. Is Mr. Salmon ever going to behave like that? Ever? Or Mr. Cameron? Or Boris Johnson?

Or any of those people? Sackcloth, ashes, mourning, any of that? Certainly not. And notice how unpretentious he is in his instruction. Verse nine.

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

[17:35] It is not a given in his mind that God is going to respond positively, but he is going to do what he thinks is the right thing. Why is that recorded in such detail?

Well, I think because when verse five says, from the greatest of them to the least, they responded, the author wants the reader to know that he really means from the greatest to the least.

This was a proper response to the word of God, a fitting response, a genuine one. Notice also the emphasis that this response is a response to the word of the Lord.

Jonah is not mentioned in verses six to nine. Indeed, we're not even told that the king encountered Jonah directly. He just heard of what was going on. That's all we're told. He may have met Jonah, but we're not told that.

And the story could jump straight from verse five to verse 10 without breaking stride. They called for a fast from the greatest of them to the least of them.

[18:39] When God saw what they did, the king bit is put in, I think, to emphasize that this is a proper response. And that sets the scene for the next little section, the final section, God and his messenger.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from the 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. God responds one way to Nineveh's response.

Jonah responds another way. Let's look at God's first. God, we're told, relented. He did not do what he'd said he would do.

Now, let me say what this is not here to teach us. This is not here to teach us that God is always changing his mind. Or that this is a new development in the story from God's point of view.

[19:43] That God somehow is surprised by the response of Nineveh. And so he has a change of heart and changes his mind. 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 on Nineveh.

It's quite clear to Jonah and to God that that's what's going on. God has not, in that sense, changed his mind. Neither is this here to make us think that when God says something we can't be sure about whether it will really happen.

You could come away from this passage thinking, how do I know if God really means what he says? He's changed his mind. Well, that's to ignore the whole way words work. Because the whole way that this story works is to suggest that everyone realizes that the words God speaks imply that things might go better if they respond the right way.

Jonah knows that. He doesn't want to go to Nineveh because things might get better for Nineveh.

The king knows that. He's not presuming, but he repents in sackcloth and ashes because he wants to avoid what might happen.

He knows that those words imply mercy might be available, might be. It's very important that we don't read the Bible woodenly and press God's words into a rigidity we wouldn't use for our own.

[21 : 09] Let me illustrate. When my children were small and I said to them, stop that, and then they didn't stop it, and then I said, I will count to three and then there will be consequences.

If you wanted to look at that kind of behavior woodenly, you might say, well, he hardly ever got to three and there were hardly ever consequences.

I never, you know, I never had one of the children say, huh, changed your mind, have you? Or, I don't think much of your words. You never do what you say you're going to do.

Now, even a very small person knows that definite sounding statements like, yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown are conditional and we're expecting that if there's change on their side, there will be change on the speaker's side.

God does precisely what you'd expect him to do here, given the story. Why has he sent a messenger to Nineveh apart from to have them turn around? The messenger's response, however, is quite different.

[22 : 24] We'll get a great deal more about this next time, but let me say that Jonah is very unhappy. Very unhappy. Indeed, very angry indeed. He knew it was coming.

He knew it was coming right from the beginning of chapter one. That's why he didn't want to go in the first place. Now it's come. He's very unhappy that it has come. And this chapter finishes with a sharp contrast between the merciful God and his unhappy messenger.

A contrast that gets explored at significant length in chapter four. For now, let me make two observations. Let's consider what this, what impact would this chapter have on an Israelite back home a bit later on reading the story, hearing the story read to them.

Well, we often come away from this book thinking the big point here is that God loves the whole world, even people from Nineveh. And of course, that's true.

But I think something rather sharper than that is being communicated here. Two things. First, what God demanded of Nineveh, God has also demanded of Israel.

[23 : 48] You see, Israel has been behaving just like the nations round about. Like Nineveh, Israel has had her prophets, Amos and Haseah in particular.

Contemporaries of Jonah have warned the northern kingdom where Jonah has been working that their end is coming if they do not turn.

She's been warned about her violence, her arrogance, her abuse of the poor, her unfaithfulness to God, her idolatry. And by the time of reading this book, Israel is well familiar with the prophetic word against herself.

She was supposed to be the light to the nations, distinctive in the world. The world was always in view in Israel's mission, but instead she has become like her unwilling prophet, nationalistic, turned in on her own affairs and frankly disobedient to the role that God has given her in the world.

And if she continues to be so, she will be overthrown. And what God does here in sending the prophet to Nineveh is to hold out in front of Israel where she can see it a mirror of her own situation.

[25 : 19] To hold in front of her a message of judgment that she does believe, that is, that Nineveh might be judged, in order to teach her about the message of judgment that she does not believe, namely, that God might judge her.

Jonah and Israel would so like to see Nineveh overthrown, but can't quite believe that if they continue in disobedience, the same would happen to them as they're hoping will happen to Nineveh.

People who've been privileged often think that they are immune from God's judgment. Israel must learn quickly that she is not. Second, what Nineveh did by way of response, Israel has not done. Perhaps above everything else, this passage emphasizes that repentance brings relief from God's judgment and mercy. Even if only for a while, Nineveh is spared.

Israel has been warned of judgment, but has there been, back in Israel, has there been a king in sackcloth calling for national repentance?

[26 : 38] Has there been a nation in mourning from the greatest of them to the least? Has there been the lack of presumption that the king of Nineveh demonstrates here? No, there hasn't, none of that.

What Nineveh did in response to God's word of warning is what Israel has not yet done. God is the God of the whole world.

When it comes to it, all the nations are the same. Some, of course, experience privileged positions from time to time. Israel has, our own nation has, but all nations are the same.

The same creator owns, rules, cares about, sees every detail of what everyone does. Some are privileged, but privileges are not meant to lead to presumption.

Let's pray together. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

[28 : 11] Thank you, gracious God, that you care in intimate detail for everything that you have made and everyone that you have made. there's not a single life in human history which you don't know fully, thoroughly, in every respect, our own included.

Thank you that you are a merciful God. Thank you that you send messengers with warnings. warnings. We pray that we would heed your warnings.

We pray that our privileges would not lead to presumption. We thank you for your generous love.

Thank you for your generous love. Give us a right heart. to fear you and to respond rightly to your words to us.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.