

# Sack-Cloth and Second Chances

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[ 0 : 01 ] Well, our reading this evening is from Jonah chapter 3, and you'll find that on page 775 of our Believe Visitors' Bibles. And as you just turn that up, let me just fill you in a little bit on the story so far.

Jonah has been called to Nineveh. He has disobeyed the Lord. The Lord has had none of that whatsoever, throws a storm.

Jonah ends up in the sea as a discipline and finally repents and comes to a point where he's willing to do God's bidding again.

And that's where we pick up the story in chapter 3. So let me read for us from verse 1. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 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 breath. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey, and he called out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

[ 1 : 20 ] 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, 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 that he had said he would do to them.

And he did not do it. Well, please do have your Bibles open at Jonah chapter 3. Now, I wonder what image crops up in your mind when you think about God.

[ 2 : 46 ] If we were to go out into the streets and ask some strangers, I think we'd get a wide range of responses. But I think a common response might be this.

God is just like a little child burning ants with his magnifying glass. He's a malevolent monster who just wants to see people suffer and burn.

He's a God who is just waiting for us to trip up so that he can punish us. And it's not just the people in the streets who often think like that, is it?

The same attitude, I think, is prevalent in many churches today. And if I'm anything to go by, in our church today as well, because I am prone to thinking of God in that way from time to time too.

But of course, we would never voice that, would we? We'd never want to voice that in open because we're fearful that we're the only ones who have ever thought about him in such a way.

[ 3 : 47 ] Well, I think this chapter, chapter 3 of Jonah, is a good antidote to that kind of poisonous thinking that so easily leeches its way into our systems.

Chapter 3 has a lot to say about the Ninevites and their repentance, but it also shows us clearly what God is like. Not a heartless, distant psychopath, but a warm and patient giver.

So let's delve into this passage and look at our first point for this evening. God gives second chances. Looking at verses 1 to 4.

In these verses, we see that God is not one for cutting ties with people on a whim. On the contrary, he is committed to his people.

And not only his covenant people, but the whole of his creation. For in these verses, we see not only Jonah get a second chance, but we see God's incredible patience with the people of Nineveh too.

[ 4 : 55 ] But let's look at Jonah first. Last week, we looked at the extreme lengths God went to in order to transform Jonah from a disobedient runaway into a useful prophet who had first-hand experience of God's unmerited salvation.

Well, this week, God graciously gives this partially transformed prophet a second chance. Now, God doesn't do what I would be tempted to do.

I am terrible for holding past sins against people. I fill up with resentment, and I want them to know exactly how kind and gracious I have been in forgiving them.

But God doesn't play any of those kind of twisted games. He doesn't say, Jonah, well, we all know how much of a mess you made of things. You better not mess it up this time.

Get your bags packed. You're on your way to Nineveh. No, he has none of that. He doesn't even mention Jonah's past sin. But simply and graciously just reiterates what he originally told him back in chapter 1, verse 2.

[ 6 : 26 ] And Jonah responds to God's kind recommission by obeying. Although the words that the Lord spoke to Jonah in verse 2 and chapter 1, verse 2 are almost identical, Jonah's response to those words could not be any different.

Back in chapter 1, he responded by fleeing from the presence of the Lord. And here in chapter 3, he responds by going to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord.

Jonah is making a deliberate parallel. Now, we said before that Jonah acts a bit like a miniature Israel and reflects them as a nation, as a whole.

So how do you think Jonah would have wanted the people of Israel to respond to this second chance, this gracious recommission that he was given? Well, I think Jonah wants them to see that there is a chance of a fresh start for them too.

Yes, Israel had well and truly made a hash of things. They hadn't reflected God like they'd ought to and had made little to no effort to make him known to the nations around them.

[ 7 : 41 ] But that didn't have to be the end of the story for Israel. God is a God of second chances. Jonah wants the people of Israel to see that God is wanting them to repent like he did back in chapter 2.

And like the sailors did back in chapter 1. And like the Ninevites are just about to do in the next section. And the encouragement for them to repent is that God will not hold their past sins against them if they do.

He will leave the past in the past and graciously use them positively in his kingdom purposes again, just like he did with Jonah.

For God, mercifully again, is not like me or my sister. When we were younger, we used to play Monopoly all the time.

That famous game that destroys families. But our games of Monopoly weren't like everybody else's for they would never reach a conclusion.

[ 8 : 46 ] They would never end. Because no matter what happened in the game, if somebody landed on Mayfair and couldn't afford to pay the price, well, we would just let the other person sink further and further into debt so that we could hold it against them forever.

And we knew fine well that the other person would never be able to come back from this. But that was okay because payment could be made by other means. So once upon a time or two, my sister would confess the crimes that I had committed in payment for losing Monopoly or doing a few chores that I was supposed to do.

Really, the mentality behind it all was that we just really enjoyed keeping the other person in our debt and would bring up the past to get what we wanted and benefit us.

But that is not what God is like. Isaiah 43 verse 25 reminds us that God is so committed to not allowing the past to dictate how he responds to us in the present that it is as if he remembers our sins no more.

It's as if he has chosen to forget our sins altogether. Now, isn't that an encouragement if you are a sinner like me? There will still be consequences of our past sin in our lives, like relational breakdown as well as other things.

[ 10 : 14 ] And there may be some things that we cannot do as a result of our sin. For example, a man caught in adultery is hardly going to be considered to become an elder in the church.

But God is not one to hold grudges and will endeavor to use us again positively in his kingdom, no matter how limited it might be because of the consequences of our sin.

But what about the Ninevites? They experienced God's grace too, didn't they? Just like Jonah did. They got a second chance.

God would have been well within his rights just to wipe them off the face of the earth without giving them an opportunity to repent, wouldn't he? And although there is no mention of the opportunity to repent in Jonah's message in verse 4, yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown, the opportunity for repentance is implied, isn't it?

I mean, why give them 40 days if it wasn't conditional? The big thing that Israel would have learned, I think, from Nineveh getting a second chance is that God is not only concerned about his own people, but rather about the whole of his creation.

[ 11 : 31 ] Although this was what God had always declared, all the way from Adam through Abraham, to be a blessing to all the nations, it would still have come as a bit of a shock, I think, to the people of Israel.

Israel had missed the mark so considerably that this truth had almost been forgotten completely. They were completely out of kilter with their God.

You see, God is not like the leader of the mafia or the Sopranos. He's not just interested in his own little nuclear family and providing for their every need and for their own personal comfort.

No, his scope of interest is much broader than that. We condense him down into a little God who is only concerned about our own personal needs and issues.

But he's a God who is concerned about the whole cosmos. He's as much concerned with rescuing and redeeming people in North Korea and Saudi Arabia as he is about rescuing people in our little city, Glasgow.

[ 12 : 38 ] And that means that some of us here will be called to go elsewhere just like Jonah was. And we do need to be a church that continues to support and send more Robbies and Morrisies.

It's a great work we're involved in here. But like the Israelites, we can't be conned into thinking that God is only concerned with our little enterprise here, however well it seems to be going.

So perhaps you are here tonight and you've perhaps been thinking about serving the Lord in long-term overseas mission. Well, let me encourage you not to suppress that thought, but rather to speak to someone, investigate it further.

Because it really would be wonderful as a church if we could send another missionary abroad. Well, we're seeing that God is a God of second chances.

He's patient towards his disobedient people like Jonah and to sinners all over the world just like the Ninevites. But God's second chances do come with obligations and responsibilities.

[ 13 : 48 ] He is patient and forbearing, but he is also a God of justice and thus cannot just overlook our sin and pretend like nothing's happened.

So we must respond rightly in order to benefit from the second chance that God gives us. So our second point for this evening is that God desires sincere change.

Looking at verses 5 to 9. We've already seen Jonah's sincere change in chapter 3, although it wasn't perfect and was certainly a bit short-sighted.

But in chapter 3, the focus now shifts on to the Ninevites. We're told immediately how the people of Nineveh respond to God's warning. They believed and called a fast and everybody put on sackcloth according to verse 5.

And I think verse 5 really works like a headline statement and then we get the details in the following four verses. And I think Jonah wants us to notice three things that show us that sincere change has indeed happened in the people of Nineveh.

[ 14 : 58 ] He wants us to see that their repentance is thorough, humble and not presumptuous. So the first thing to notice is that everybody is involved in this act of repentance from the greatest to the least, verse 5.

Every single person who heard Jonah's message began to repent no matter what their status was. And as a result, the message even came to the ears of the king of Nineveh.

And the king then issues a decree with his nobles, verse 7, that not only should the people put on sackcloth and ashes and fast, but that their animals should as well.

Everyone and everything was to turn from their evil ways, no exception. The people of Nineveh took Jonah's warning very, very seriously.

And rather than working out what the mere minimum was that they could get away with, they went for maximum thorough repentance. Secondly, their repentance was humble.

[16:08] Sackcloth and ashes were a real sign of humility. It was a sign of unworthiness and a way of expressing sorrow for your sin back in Jonah's day.

And you'll notice that everybody put on a sackcloth and cover themselves, including the king. It's quite a remarkable sign of humility, isn't it, to take off your royal robes and put on an itchy sack and cover yourself in dirt in front of absolutely everybody.

Could you imagine what a stir it would cause if Queen Lizzie did that today? It would be quite the sight to behold, I think. Sackcloth and ashes, as well as fasting, were signs of absolute destitution, recognizing that you do not deserve any good thing that you have been given, clothes or food. And the Ninevites did it en masse and called out to God, recognizing that they could not save themselves and were absolutely dependent on his mercy. Thirdly, the repentance was not presumptuous.

Notice that they went to all of this effort and mourned for this sin, not knowing whether God would relent or not, verse 9. But the king says, who knows?

[17:31] God may turn and relent from his fierce anger so that we may not perish, but he might not. But they are not presuming that forgiveness was guaranteed.

Now that might be because their gods were capricious and couldn't be trusted. Nothing was guaranteed with them. And they didn't know whether Jonah's God was similar to their gods or not. They likely didn't know the full character of Jonah's God. But nonetheless, it is the right attitude that they adopt, is it not? For it is the opposite end of the spectrum to abusing God's grace, isn't it? Well, these three traits of repentance, it being thorough, humble, and not presumptuous, are the reason why Jesus uses the Ninevites as an example of repentance in the New Testament. And there would have been a real poke in the eye for the people of Israel back in Jonah's day, as well as the people in Jesus' day. For this is what Israel's repentance had never, ever been.

[18:38] There had been reforms in the past under some of the good kings, but they never really went far enough. The golden calves still stood proudly on high hills, and the people still went to worship Baal, rather than the God that they knew.

There was no real humility or recognition that they deserved judgment, but rather presumption reigned. We're God's people, they said.

We'll be all right. God will always take us back. So why worry? Let's just do as we please and make a sacrifice later on.

That should hopefully appease him. Does it sound uncomfortably familiar at all? I think we all have, at times, that similar attitude, do we not?

We try and do the bare minimum, and trust that God won't mind, or presume that God will gloss over our intentional sins because he is so kind and merciful.

[19:40] It's his job, after all, to forgive our sins, is it not? We are all prone to abuse God's grace and our privilege just as much as the Israelites were.

And sadly, we are more prone to look like proud and presumptuous Pharisees at times than we are the blind beggars that we actually are. Sometimes there is little evidence of sincere change in us, and if that is the case, then we really need to be careful.

But there are conditions and time frames on us as they were on the people of Nineveh. Nineveh got 40 days to repent. Israel, a few hundred years.

But we have but a lifetime, and none of us know exactly how long that might be. If you have that presumptuous attitude, thinking that you can take advantage of God and his grace and just carry on as you are, not loving him or obeying him, then you are sadly mistaken.

God's grace and mercy is conditional on you showing a sincere change in heart. Yes, you may have confessed Jesus as your Lord and Savior 20 years ago and think that you're safe.

[21:02] But as J.I. Packer reminds us, the only proof of past conversion is present convertedness. Please don't fall into the same trap that Israel did and presume upon your pedigree and your past performance, for we all know how that ended for them in absolute disaster.

So God desires sincere change in us. And the wonderful thing is that he genuinely responds when we call out to him and resolve to change like the Ninevites did.

So our last point for this evening is that God responds to sackcloth, looking at verse 10. Now the Ninevites were a particularly terrible bunch.

They were part of a military nation and infamous for their acts of brutality in war and were involved in the most heinous of sexual practices. God would have been well within his rights, as we've

already said, just have done away with them altogether.

He could have finished them off with a big cosmic zap and that would have been it. And I think that is what the people of Israel and Jonah himself hoped would have happened, as we'll see when we get to chapter 4 next week.

[ 22 : 20 ] But God is not like that. He is not that child with a magnifying glass, burning up ants on a whim. He isn't like the child who just longs to get home from school so he can put salt on slugs and watch them shrivel up and die.

He is, as he's described in chapter 4, verse 2, gracious, merciful, slow to anger, loving, and takes no delight in disaster or pain.

And that is exactly why he sent Jonah to Nineveh in the first place, to give them the opportunity to respond. Now some would argue here that God seems to change his mind, doesn't he?

And he's not allowed to do that. He clearly states that in 40 days Nineveh will be overthrown, but then chooses to relent in verse 10.

So how can that be? For God can't change. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever, is he not? Well, if we think this way, then we are completely misunderstanding the nature of prophecy.

[ 23 : 30 ] Prophecy is not a rigid declaration that must be fulfilled, but rather an instrument that God uses in the world to bring about his purposes.

A chap called Wolf, who's a commentator, writes, the prophetic word is not directed towards its fulfillment in history, but is an instrument of history that is intended to bring about the conversion of those who hear it, and therefore the non-fulfillment of what was threatened.

In other words, prophetic warnings are conditional, and not just declarations of what is certain to pass. And if that is the case, then we cannot be fatalistic.

We can't say that God is going to do what he wants because he is sovereign and in charge of everything, and it really doesn't matter what I do or how I behave. We do have genuine responsibility to respond to God rightly.

Our decisions are real, and they really do matter. Richard Pratt writes, belief in God's immutability, which is just a fancy way of saying this idea that God can't change or change his mind, does not negate the importance of human choices.

[ 24 : 51 ] Under the sovereign control of God, the choices people make determines the direction that history will take. Now, isn't that staggering? Now, I don't think Israel were particularly fatalistic, but more likely just very apathetic, and that's why they never responded to the warnings God sent them.

But some of us here tonight will be fatalistic and think that it doesn't really matter how we act or what we do, and we have to shake that attitude off if that is us, for it is absolutely paralyzing to have that attitude.

It will stop us from praying. It will stop us from sharing the gospel. It would even stop us from getting out of bed in the morning if we don't think our actions and our decisions really matter.

If we don't think that God responds to our real decisions and our response to him, then we will never get out of the starting blocks. This example of God responding to the Ninevites' actions should be a real encouragement for us to grab our Christian lives by the scruff of the neck and run with them, for it generally matters whether you speak to your family and your friends about Jesus or not.

And it generally matters whether you get out of bed in the morning to pray or not, though Satan will try and convince you that it doesn't. For God responds to what we do, like he responded to the Ninevite sackcloth.

[ 26 : 23 ] And under the sovereign control of God, he will use our actions to guide the course of history. Now couldn't Israel have done with knowing that?

Then they might have been a light to the nations like they were supposed to be, rather than a ruin. And don't we so desperately need to know this too, that we might take our responsibility seriously and mirror the wonderful God we know to the outside world and make him known here and overseas.

But what if I am not a Christian? What if I'm here tonight and I'm somewhat intrigued by the Bible and God, but I'm by no means ready to pin my claws to the mass and call myself a Christian?

Well, please don't be fatalistic if you are here and you're not a Christian. On hearing this sermon, you might have thought, well, if God is in control, then my decisions don't really matter.

He will either make me a Christian or he won't. And I have very little to do with the matter. Well, in one sense, you'd be right to say that. God will have his way no matter what.

[ 27 : 38 ] He is sovereign. He's in control over absolutely everything in the universe. But you do have personal responsibility that you cannot shirk. And my advice to you would be not to overcomplicate things.

There is only one question you need to ask yourself if you do not know God. And that is, will I believe or will I not? And the answer to that question will shape your future, your history, for better or for worse.

C.S. Lewis wrote, for you will certainly carry out God's purposes, however you act. But it makes a difference to you whether you serve as a Judas or a John.

You have real responsibility for God generally responds to sackcloth. But how will you respond? In belief, like the Ninevites, and experience God's steadfast love as he relents from his judgment?

Or will you not believe and experience the very thing that the Ninevites were so eager to avoid?

Well, I don't know how you thought about God before coming out this evening.

[ 28 : 54 ] I don't know if you thought God was cruel and capricious, or whether you thought of him as he truly is. Patient, kind, and overwhelmingly patient and generous.

But hopefully tonight we've seen that he is not the kind of God who will ram a stick in your wheels when you're cycling along just to have a laugh at you. He is not waiting for you to trip up so he can give you a good smiting.

But rather he's graciously delaying his judgment on humanity that we might have a second chance to know him and serve him rightly. And we see the ultimate expression of God's grace in Jesus.

God would send Jesus to the cross hundreds of years later to take the punishment for the sins of all those who took him up on his offer of a second chance and had a genuine, sincere change of heart.

And he will graciously delay his final judgment on all sin that more and more people might come and trust in him. But that offer does not last forever.

[ 30 : 03 ] Therefore, every breath is a merciful gift. For the death sentence has loomed over us ever since conception because we are riddled with sin and tainted by evil just like the Ninevites were.

But rather than zap us on the spot, God patiently waits and reaches out to us in Christ. So if you don't know him, will you respond to him like the Ninevites did?

Will you take God up on his second chance as he offers it to you? And if you do know him, which will be the vast majority of us here, will you take your responsibility seriously and make this wonderful God that we know known to the rest of the world?

Let me pray for us. Father God, we thank you that you are a kind and gracious God.

I thank you that the true extent of that kindness is seen in the fact that you sent your son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sin. Thank you that you have not given up on our world.

[ 31 : 23 ] And we just want to say sorry, Lord, for the times we have just focused on ourselves and on our own comfort. And sorry for the times we have abused your grace.

We pray, Lord, that you'd make us a church that shares your kind and gracious heart. Help us to share your grace, mercy and love with the world around us and overseas.

And grant us wisdom as to know how best to do that. In Jesus' name, Amen.