

Sack-Cloth and Second Chances

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Date: 20 September 2017

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[0 : 00] Let me just pray for us as we start off this meeting together. Father God, we thank you for the opportunity to come together in the middle of a busy week.

And we pray as we open your word and see what you have to say to us, that we would meet with you and that we would see you as you truly are and that you would shatter any false impressions that we have of you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, our Bible reading for today is in Jonah chapter 3. So if you have these blue Bibles, you'll find that on page 775.

I'll just give you a moment to turn that up. Okay, let me read for us.

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.

[1 : 10] 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, 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.

[2 : 23] 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, I wonder what image crops up in your mind when you think about God. If we were to ask strangers out on the street, I think a common response would be that God is like a child with a magnifying glass, burning up ants with glee.

He's a God who's just waiting for us to trip up, so that he can come down on us like a ton of bricks. And it's not just the people on the streets who think like this, those outside the church.

But that same attitude is prevalent within our churches as well. Although none of us would like to voice that out loud, because we think we're the only ones who think of God wrongly.

Well, I think this chapter, chapter 3, is a good antidote to that kind of poisonous thinking that is leached into our systems. This chapter shows us clearly what God is like.

[3 : 31] Not a heartless, distant psychopath, but a warm and patient giver. So let's delve straight into the passage and look at our first point for this afternoon.

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 people, and not only his covenant people, but the whole of his creation. For in these verses, we don't only see Jonah get a second chance, do we?

But we see God's incredible patience with the people of Nineveh too. Let's look at Jonah first. Verse 1. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.

Despite all that Jonah had done, God graciously called him to the same task of warning Nineveh again. Now, notice that God doesn't do what I would be tempted to do.

[4 : 38] I am absolutely terrible for holding people's past sins against them. I want people to know exactly how kind I've been in forgiving them, and just how gracious I've been, and for them to be in my debt.

But God doesn't play those kind of twisted mind games. No, he doesn't say, Jonah, well, we all know how much you've messed up, and how much you owe me.

So you better get your bags packed. You're off to Nineveh. Don't mess it up this time. No, God doesn't even mention Jonah's past sin and disobedience.

But simply reiterates what he originally told Jonah back in chapter 1, verse 2. Nearly word for word. And this time, Jonah obeys.

Now, we've said before that Jonah acts like a miniature Israel. And reflects what they were like as a nation. So how do you think Jonah would have wanted the people of Israel to respond to his gracious recommission and second chance?

[5 : 44] Well, I think Jonah wanted Israel to see that there was a chance of a fresh start in Israel, too. Yes, Israel had well and truly made a hash of things. They hadn't reflected God like they ought to have.

And they had made little to no effort to make their God known to the nations around them. But that didn't have to be the end of the story. God is a God of second chances.

And God is willing to leave the past in the past. And graciously use Israel positively in his kingdom purposes again. Just like he did with Jonah. And all it needed was repentance.

Now, isn't that an encouragement if you are a sinner like the people of Israel were or like I am? For God gives second chances and will kindly call us back to the very thing that we have refused to do in the first place.

God is willing to forgive and forget and make us useful in his kingdom purposes again. No matter how disobedient we have been or how sinful we have been. But what about the Ninevites?

[6 : 51] They experienced a second chance, too, didn't they? Just like Jonah. God would have been well within his limits. It would have been well within his rights to wipe them off the face of the earth altogether without giving them any opportunity to repent.

But he didn't. He gave them 40 days to respond to his warning. Verse 4. And the big thing that Israel would have learned 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.

Although this was what God had always declared, all the way back from Adam, all the way through Abraham, for Israel to be a blessing to the nations, that God was concerned with the whole world, this would have come as a real shock to Israel.

Israel had missed the mark so considerably that this truth about God and his concern for the world had become just a distant memory, utterly forgotten.

You see, God is not like a mafia boss. He's not just interested in providing for his own little nuclear family, providing for their every need.

[8 : 06] No, his scope of interest is much broader than that. We condense him down to just a little teeny God who's only here to meet our personal little needs.

But he's a God who's concerned with not only the whole world, but the whole cosmos. He's as much concerned about rescuing and redeeming people in Saudi Arabia and North Korea as he is about rescuing people here in our little teeny city, Glasgow.

So we can't be conned into thinking that God is only concerned about our own little enterprises. And that means for us, well, we need to reshape our concerns to match up with God's concerns.

We, like Israel, need to take our second chance seriously and bring our purposes and our concerns in line with God's. So God is a God of second chances.

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

[9 : 17] He's patient and forbearing, but he's also just and thus can't simply just sweep our sin under the rug. So we must respond rightly to him in order to benefit from the second chance that he offers.

Our second chance must elicit sincere change within us. So our second point for this afternoon is that God desires sincere change. Verses 5 to 9.

We are told immediately how the people of Nineveh responded to God's warning. They believed, they called a fast, and everybody put on sackcloth.

Verse 5. Verse 5 works as a headline statement, and then we get the details of this in the following four verses. Jonah fleshes out what this repentance looks like.

And I think Jonah wants us to notice three things that show us that a sincere change of heart has happened in the people of Nineveh. He wants us to see that their repentance was thorough, that it was humble, and it wasn't presumptuous.

[10:23] So let's look at how thorough it is first. 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.

And he issues a decree, doesn't he, with his nobles, verse 7, that not only should the people put on sackcloth and ashes and fast, but even the animals were going to play a part in this too.

Everyone and everything that had breath in Nineveh was to turn from their evil ways, no exceptions. Absolutely thorough repentance.

Secondly, their repentance was humble. Sackcloth and ashes were a real sign of humility. It was a sign of unworthiness and a way of expressing sorrow for your sin.

[11:26] And you'll notice that even the king was found rolling around in the ashes. Now, that is quite a remarkable sign of humility. To take off your royal robes, put on an itchy sack instead, and cover yourself in dirt.

Could you imagine what a stir it would cause if her royal highness, Queen Elizabeth, did that today, put on sackcloth and ashes? The whole nation would be in uproar, wouldn't they?

Because it's such a sign of humility for someone so royal to do. Thirdly, their repentance was not presumptuous. Notice that they went to all this effort and mourned for their sin, not knowing whether God was going to relent or not.

Verse 9, the king says, Who knows? God may turn and relent from his fierce anger so that we may not perish. But there's no guarantees. They're not presuming upon forgiveness.

Now, that might be because their gods were capricious and couldn't be trusted and nothing was guaranteed with their foreign gods. And they didn't know whether Jonah's god was just like their gods but in a different guise.

[12:43] But nonetheless, it is the right attitude for them to adopt, isn't it? Because it is the complete opposite end of the spectrum to abusing God's grace, isn't it? Well, these three traits of their repentance being thorough and humble and not presumptuous would be a real poke in the eye of any normal Israelite.

For that is what Israel's repentance had never, ever been. There had been reforms in the past under other kings but they were never thorough enough, were they?

The golden calves still stood proudly and people went to them to worship instead of the temple. And there was no real humility or recognition that they deserved judgment all the way through Israel's history but rather presumption ruled.

We're God's people they said we'll be alright. God will always take us back so why worry? Sounds awful attitude, doesn't it?

But if we're honest it's a bit closer to home than we might like to think. But we can have the exact same attitude can't we? We presume that God will gloss over our intentional sins because He is so kind and so merciful.

[14:03] It's His job to forgive sins after all, is it not? We're all prone to abuse God's grace just as much as the Israelites were in their day.

But intentionally abusing God's grace is a serious matter so we need to be careful for there are conditions and time frames on us.

Nineveh got 40 days to repent. Israel had a few hundred years before the Assyrian Empire rolled in. And we have but a lifetime and we just do not know how long that will be.

If you have that presumptuous attitude thinking that you can take advantage of God and His grace then you're sadly mistaken. God's grace and mercy is conditional on you showing a sincere change of heart.

Yes, you may have confessed Jesus as your Lord and Savior 20 years ago and think that you're safe. But as J.I. Packer reminds us the only proof of past conversion is present convertedness.

[15:12] Please don't fall into the same trap that Israel did and presume upon your pedigree or your past performance and carry on in your sin intentionally thinking that God's going to overlook it.

For we all know how that ended for Israel. Rather, take the second chance that God offers seriously and respond with a sincere change in heart.

God desires a sincere change in us and the wonderful thing is that He genuinely responds to us when we call out to Him and resolve the change just like the Ninevites did.

So our last point for this afternoon, God responds to sackcloth verse 10. Now the Ninevites were a particularly terrible bunch.

They were part of a military nation who were infamous for acts of brutality of war and the most heinous of sexual practices and God would have been well within His rights to have done away with them altogether.

[16:13] He could have finished them off with a big cosmic zap and that would have been the end of it. He wouldn't have to worry about them at all. And I think that's exactly what the people of Israel and Jonah were hoping would have happened as we'll see next week when we look at chapter 4.

But God is not like that. He's not like the child with the magnifying glass burning up ants with glee. He isn't like the child who just can't wait to come home from school so he can pour salt on slugs and watch them shrivel up in his garden.

No, He's exactly 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 why He sent Jonah to Nineveh in the first place. To give him this opportunity to repent so he could relent from the disaster that they were owed. Now some would argue that God well He seems to change His mind doesn't He in this chapter.

He clearly states that in 40 days Nineveh is going to be overthrown. But then by the time we get to verse 10 He's chosen to relent. And yet God isn't supposed to change His mind is He?

[17:27] He's the same yesterday today and forever. Well if we're thinking that way we're completely misunderstanding the nature of prophecy.

Prophecy is not a rigid declaration that must be fulfilled word for word. But rather an instrument that God uses in the world to bring about His purposes.

And if that is the case then we just simply cannot be fatalistic. We can't say that God is going to do what He says what He wants because He's sovereign. So it doesn't really matter how I act or how I behave or how I respond.

We do have genuine responsibility to respond to God rightly. Our decisions are real and they do really matter.

Richard Pratt reminds us that under the sovereign control of God the choices that people make determine the directions history will take. That's quite staggering.

[18:29] Israel may never have repented properly because of this fatalistic and apathetic attitude. And some of us here today might have that exact same attitude. But we must shake it off because it is absolutely paralyzing.

It will stop us from praying or stop us from sharing the gospel and even getting out of bed in the morning if we don't think our actions and our decisions really matter. God responding to the Ninevites actions should be a real encouragement to us to grab our Christian lives by the scruff of the neck and to run with them.

For it generally does matter whether you speak to your family or your friends about Jesus or not. It generally does matter if you get up and pray though Satan will tell you that it doesn't.

Because God responds to what we do like he responded to the Ninevites sackcloth. And under his sovereign control he will use our actions to guide the course of history.

Now couldn't Israel have done with knowing that? Then they might have actually been a light to the nations rather than a ruin. And don't we desperately need that?

[19:47] Need to know this too that we might take our responsibility seriously and mirror the wonderful God that we know to the outside world and make him known to the nations. But what if I am here today and I'm not a Christian?

What if I am intrigued about the Bible and about God but I haven't pinned my colors to the mask yet? Well I'd encourage you not to be fatalistic either.

You might say things like 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 to be honest I don't really have much of a say in the matter.

Well in one sense if you're saying that you're right. God will have his way no matter what. He is sovereign. He is in control. But you do have real personal responsibility that you just cannot shirk.

And my advice to you would be not to over complicate things. There's only one question you need to ask yourself today if that is you. Will I believe or will I not?

[20 : 56] And the answer to that question will shape your future and your history for better or for worse. As C.S. Lewis writes for you will certainly carry out God's purpose however you act.

But it makes a real difference to you whether you serve like a Judas or like a John. You have real responsibility for God generally does respond to sackcloth.

But how will you respond? Well to conclude I don't know how you thought about God before coming out this lunchtime. You maybe hadn't given him much thought at all today.

I don't know if you thought God was cruel and capricious or not. But hopefully we've seen today that he's not the kind of God who will ram a stick in your wheels just to see you fall over the handlebars and laugh at your misfortune.

God who graciously delays his judgment who longs to relent on humanity that we might have a second chance to know him. Therefore every breath becomes a merciful gift if that's the case.

[22 : 07] For like it or not the death sentence has loomed over us even since conception because we are riddled with sin. so if you don't know him will you respond to him like the Ninevites did?

And if you do know him which will be the vast majority of us here today will we respond rightly to the second chance that he's given us and sincerely change and make him known to the world?

Let me pray for us. Amen. Amen. Amen. 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 us then. Thank you that you have not given up on the world.

Thank you that you're not malevolent and cruel. And we want to say sorry Lord for all the times we've just focused on ourselves and our own comfort. And sorry for the times when we have absolutely abused your grace thinking we can get away with it.

[23 : 17] Make us a people that shares your heart we pray. Help us to share your grace mercy and love with the world around us and grant us wisdom as how best to do that.

In Jesus name. Amen. The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

father father father father father we thank you that you're good and kind and gracious that you're patient longing to relent from disaster always outstretching your arm for a second chance to us your fallen and disobedient people and we pray as we go away to our own lives after this lunch time that we remember what you're like that we'd be encouraged and that we would take our responsibilities seriously in light of what you've done for us and we pray all this in Jesus strong name Amen Amen