

A PREACHER, A PLANT, A WORM, AND A WIND

Jonah 3-4

Today we are going to conclude our study of the book of Jonah. The story of Jonah is so much more than the fascinating tale of man swallowed by a fish and living to tell about it. And I want you to see today that as much as any book in the Old Testament, Jonah shows us the great and mighty love of God, God's love for sinners and God's love for saints. And most of all I want you to see today God's great and mighty love for you.

Turn with me, please, to Jonah 3. I want us to actually begin reading at 2:10. Ch. 2:10 tells us that God spoke to the great fish and that it vomited Jonah onto the dry land. Someone said years ago when that upchuck occurred it is still unclear which individual was the happiest, Jonah or the fish. For the fish was surely glad to get a sour, stinking, backslidden prophet off his stomach. But whichever the case may be, Jonah was freed from his three day tomb and came out a changed man! Not completely changed by any means, but changed in his mindset about obeying God. He was not about to disobey and face the music again! So 3:1 says that the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Dear friends, these are precious words! God gave Jonah a second chance.

Do you need a second chance today? If you do, you are certainly walking in good company. Adam needed a second chance after he ate the forbidden fruit. Abraham needed a second chance after he lied about his wife being his sister. Jacob needed a second chance after he deceived his brother Esau. Moses needed a second chance after he struck the rock instead of speaking to it. Job needed a second chance after he blamed God for his troubles. David needed a second chance after he committed adultery and murder. Elijah needed a second chance after he ran from Jezebel. Peter needed a second chance after he denied Jesus three times. And Jonah needed a second chance after he ran from God's call.

And beloved, God would have us to know today that He is the God of the second chance! When you've denied Him, when you've failed Him, when you've broken His heart, He is the God Who has promised that "...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature can separate us from the love of God (His love), which is in Jesus Christ our Lord". And He has also promised, "If we confess our sins He is faithful to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness". And if you need a second chance today, God will give it to you! If you need a third chance or a fourth chance or a fiftieth chance, God will give it to you, if you will humble yourself before Him and sincerely ask for his forgiveness. And if you do, He will wash you from your sins whiter than snow and give you a brand new start.

So God gave Jonah a second chance. He spoke to him and told him again to go to Nineveh, and this time Jonah was not so foolish to run from his call, and he marched straight into Nineveh and proclaimed to the people that God was going to pour out His judgment upon them in 40 days. Jonah preached loud and he preached hard, and his message got through. For the Bible says that from the lowest peasant to the king in his palace the Ninevites cried out to God begging His forgiveness. And they did more than just shed tears. They brought forth works fitting repentance. They turned from their wicked ways and began to live lives that honored God. And God heard their cries and forgave them and spared them from His judgment.

Friends, may we never, ever forget that just as in the days of Nineveh, and further back, just as in the days of Noah, God still judges sin. God does not play games. God does not talk out of both sides of His mouth. Numbers 23:19 says, "God *is* not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" Whatever God says you can be sure that He does. And God has made known over and over in His Word what happens to sinners who die in their sins. Psalm 7:11 says that God is angry with the wicked every day. And Ezekiel 18:4 says, "The soul that sins, it shall die". And that's what He told the men of Nineveh. "In 40 days you are going to die for your sins". And God meant what He said.

There are so many people today who do not believe that God punishes sin. For Satan has duped the world into believing that there is no hell, or that hell is only for the worst of the worst of sinners, and they certainly do not fall into that category. But friends, if God did not punish sin then the cross of Christ was the most irresponsible, unjust, unloving act in the history of the universe. For at the cross God's only Son hung in agony and shame, absolutely guiltless, suffering for the sins all mankind. But if there is no hell to avoid, or if sinners can miss hell just by being a good person, then the God Who allowed His Son to die such a death is a cruel, sadistic God and not the kind of God I want to serve. But no matter how much the scoffers scoff, you can be sure that if you die with unforgiven sin that your destiny is a lake of fire that burns forever and ever. John writes in Rev. 20:15, "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire".

But, praise God, that is not the end of the story. For just as surely as God punishes sin, **God loves sinners and longs that even the worst of them be saved.**

And we know that He loves sinners because He relented from His punishment of Nineveh. Now, friends, if anyone ever deserved to be judged it was Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, and Assyria was known as the cruelest nation in the entire world. One commentator said that they were a race of warriors. Whoever heard of a designation like that? One said that the Assyrians would sometimes commit genocide of entire cities of their enemies, leaving not one person alive. Another said that they would sometimes impale their victims and leave them to roast to death in the desert sun, and that sometimes they beheaded their victims by the thousands, and sometimes they even skinned people alive. The Ninevites were

wicked to the core. No wonder Jonah longed for their judgment. But no matter how much they deserved judgment, God's grace was greater than all of their sin, and He spared them.

Now, I know that many of you are probably thinking, "Preacher, you just said that God always did what He said that He would do, and God said that He was going to destroy Nineveh, but He didn't do it. So what's the deal? Did God change His mind?" No, He did not. God knows everything. He knows the beginning and the end. He knew that the men of Nineveh would repent, and He knew that when they did He would relent in punishing them. God didn't change His mind, He just changed His plans. Look at Jer. 18:7-8:

"The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy *it*, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it."

God loves sinners so much that no matter what they do, He will change His plans and refuse to punish them if they will only turn from their sins.

Look at what Jonah declared about God in 4:2. First of all Jonah said, "Lord, I know that you are gracious. The Hebrew word for 'gracious' is used only of God in the Old Testament. It means to bestow free pardon to those who are totally undeserving. The word 'merciful' means to love tenderly, to exercise pity. God does not only pardon sinners, but He does it with true compassion and empathy. And the word "lovingkindness" means the full flow of natural affection. Its Aramaic equivalent is used to describe the flow of a mother's milk to her infant child, representing all the love that she has, freely poured out to her newborn baby. Friends, that's the kind of love the God has for sinners. God gave up the most precious treasure that He had, His only Son, that you and I might become His sons. Does not that shed light on the extent of His great love? But even more amazing than that, Paul says that Jesus died for sinners **while we were still His enemies** (Rom. 5:10). Make that personal this morning! While you were Jesus' enemy, He stepped up to the cross and died for you.

So the question that every one of us needs to be sure we have the right answer for today is, "Am I still God's enemy?" "Have I ever made peace with God, or right now am I facing God's judgment should I die in 40 days, or even today?" And remember, you don't make peace with God by deciding to be a better person and start loving your wife, or start going to church, or stop cursing and swearing or drinking or smoking. Paul writes in Rom. 5:1, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Peace with God comes only through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, when you confess to God that you are hopelessly lost in your sins, and then by faith alone you cast all of your hope of Heaven only the fact that Jesus paid your sin debt on the cross.

So the only right answer to the question, "Am I still God's enemy", is "No! I am not God's enemy. Because I know that I've repented of my sins, just like the men of

Nineveh, and I have trusted in Jesus alone as my Lord and Savior, and I've been washed in His blood, and now I am at peace with God."

But there is a truth that goes right along with God's love for sinners that I do not want us to miss. And that is, **God is a God Who is mighty to save**. OT scholar Charles Feinberg pointed out that nowhere else in the Bible nor in secular history do we see such a great turning to God by the preaching of one man. Nineveh was one of the largest cities in the world. Some estimate that it had as many as 600,000 people. That's over 2½ times the size of Birmingham. And the entire city got saved. What a revival!! And it came with no pre-revival witnessing, no prayer rallies, no publicity, no potluck suppers, no revival choir, and no celebrity testimonies. And perhaps most amazing, the preacher didn't even want to be there! Jonah's heart was still not right with God, but he was too afraid of the consequences not to go.

Now beloved, God sends a crystal clear message to every born again believer in Jesus Christ through Jonah, and to every gospel preaching church. And the message is, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel! Go to the lost in your neighborhood, go to the lost in your state, and in your country, and go to the lost to the ends of the earth. Go to those who are like you, go to those who are unlike you. Go and tell them that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, and tell them that He is mighty to save!" And beloved, Jesus **is** mighty to save! Is. 63:1: "Who is this who comes from Edom, With dyed garments from Bozrah...traveling in the greatness of His strength?" This is a prophetic passage speaking of Jesus' Second Coming. And Jesus answers the question of who is coming: "I who speak in righteousness, **mighty to save**". Paul writes, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the **power of God unto salvation** to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). And beloved, if God's people would believe that with all of our hearts and begin to share the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, we would see the waters in the baptistery stirred a whole lot more than we do. And may God help us to repent of our lack of faith in the gospel and lack of love for lost sinners and do it!

So we see from God's dealings with the Ninevites that He loves sinners and desires for even the worst to be saved. But there is another message that God has for us through His dealing with Jonah. And that message is, **God loves the saints, and is abundantly patient when we disobey**. In chapter four we see God's patience displayed and we also see God's awesome power displayed, as He speaks to four totally different types of beings, a preacher, a plant, a worm, and a wind. God first all speaks to Jonah. Look at ch. 4:1- 5. Jonah is a classic example of a child of God living in the flesh, living under the power of the unholy spirit, the Devil. Think about it. Jonah had just been a hairsbreadth away from death because of rebellion against God. And when he cried out to God to save him, God did! And now when the Ninevites cry out to God for salvation just like he did, and God saved them, he gets angry. How could he be so forgetful? How could he be so ungrateful?

Well, I'll tell you. Jonah was a backslidden, prideful, judgmental preacher. He could not conceive how God would spare such a wicked city as Nineveh. Now, as for himself, he deserved to be forgiven. His sin was miniscule compared to the Assyrians. But forgive Nineveh? No way in a million years should they be forgiven, and God just blew it. And Jonah was so upset with God that he essentially said to Him, "God, I just can't accept what You have done. Just take my life!" Someone once said that Jonah prayed his best prayer in the worst place, the fish's belly, and he prayed his worst prayer in the best place, the place where God's great grace was poured out on sinners. Well, this was indeed Jonah's worst prayer. And that's because Jonah's attitude was as just as lowdown and sorry as it had ever been, maybe even worse, as he pouted over God sparing Nineveh. For in addition to wishing the worst on Nineveh, he was finding fault with God. Now, if you were God, what do you think you would have done with Jonah at this point? I think you probably would have done what I probably would have done. Jonah would have been a goner.

But here we see the love and patience of God. Instead of doing what Jonah foolishly asked, God reached out to lovingly chastise him and restore him to fellowship with Himself. After Jonah had irreverently unloaded on God, God simply asked him a question, "Is it right for you to be angry?" But Jonah ignored God's question and went out to a spot overlooking Nineveh to see if God would change His mind again and still destroy them. And the Bible says that Jonah built himself a shelter to sit under to protect him from the sun. But the shelter didn't work, and so God graciously spoke to a tiny little plant and said, "Grow", and did it ever grow! In just a few hours it grew to a height higher than Jonah and shaded him from the torturous desert sun. And Jonah was so happy. And it is interesting to note that this is the only time in the book that Jonah is not pouting or in deep trouble. And he is happy for a selfish reason. God had made him comfortable.

But Jonah's comfort was short lived. Look at v. 7-8. Just as God had spoken to the plant, God spoke to a worm and a wind. And the worm came and chewed Jonah's plant into and it fell to the ground, and the wind came and blew down the scorching rays of the desert sun on Jonah's head until he almost fainted. And then he cried out again, "I'd be better off dead than alive". And when God gently asked him again if he had a right to be angry, Jonah replied, "You bet I do, even if it kills me!" Look at the latter part of v. 9. "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" And then God said, "OK, Jonah. I've had enough of your bellyaching. Sit down and listen". And look what God told him in v. 10-11. God said, "Jonah, you had pity on an insignificant plant which came up overnight and was gone just as quickly. You had no investment in it whatsoever, but you still loved it. How much more should I spare Nineveh, that great city, which has 120,000 little children in it that don't even know right from wrong, plus many head of livestock? Don't you see how much more valuable they are than a plant? They are My creations, and I love them!" And thus the book of Jonah ends, with God's love once again being magnified, even in His love for animals.

Now, the Holy Spirit chose to end the story without ever revealing what happened to Jonah. We don't know if Jonah ever repented and was restored to fellowship with God or not. We would like to think that he did, but it is not critical that we know or God would have told us. But there are two things that God wants us to teach us from Jonah's chastisement if we will not be as stubborn as Jonah and listen. First of all, we can learn that **sin will get a malicious grip if unconfessed and unforsaken**. Somewhere even before Jonah was called to go to Nineveh he fell into a sinful attitude toward the heathen nations around Israel. But God in His mercy still called Jonah to be His missionary to the Ninevites. But even after his near death experience in the ocean and the belly of the fish, Jonah came out of it with a proud, judgmental heart. And that stubborn pride and self-righteous hatred further led him to anger against God. And his heart became so hardened that he thought he was completely in the right and would rather have died than let go of his sin.

I wonder how many Christians today are like Jonah. They are serving God just like he was. They are teaching Sunday School, or singing in the choir, or serving on a church committee, or they are a deacon or a preacher, but they have a sin in their life that has a grip on them so strong that they would rather die than give it up. But if they would give it up before death, they refuse to give it up for anything else. For the good of their family, for the good of their church, or most of all for the glory of God. Beloved, that's the way sin is. Proverbs 5:22 says that the wicked man is caught in the cords of his sin. But that goes for the saved man as well. It can destroy our lives (Pvbs. 4:19; 13:15). It can destroy our witness. Jonah's witness was certainly destroyed with the mariners. And one is as bad as the other. I ask you, are you like Jonah?

But there is another lesson that God would teach us through Jonah today. We stated it a few moments ago. **God loves the saints and is abundantly patient when we disobey**. After God saved Jonah's life and recommissioned him in His service, and Jonah still refused to go with a right attitude, and after he refused to repent when he saw the great revival among the Ninevites and sulked and pouted and accused God of doing wrong, God still reached out in love to restore Jonah to Himself.

I ask you, are you a modern day Jonah, serving God with a heart full of pride, prejudice, covetousness, selfishness, lusts, or whatever sin it might be? If you are, God is reaching out to you to turn from your sin and serve Him with a pure heart, and once more know the joy of your salvation.

And friend, if you've never had a time in your life when you know that you met Jesus Christ face to face, knowing that you were lost in your sins, and then you trusted Him alone as your Savior and Lord, God is calling you to repent and come to Christ today. And if you do, He will surely forgive you just as He did the men of Nineveh.