

JONAH

Part 3: “A God of Justice and Mercy”

Jonah 2:10–3:9

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Sunday, February 12, 2023 (Epiphany Season)

Scripture Reading

“And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. 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, 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.” (Jonah 2:10–3:9, ESV).

Introduction

Jesus was in the middle of one of his longer teachings on the nature of discipleship. As he expounds upon the crucial importance of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, one of his disciples asks him a question: *“Lord, how many times do I have to forgive someone who has sinned against me?”*

The implication is that the followers of Jesus find his insistence on giving grace deeply challenging.

As per his habit, Jesus doesn’t give a simple answer. Instead, he tells a story. He talks about an immensely wealthy king who begins to settle his debts with his servants.

One particular servant stands before the king, shaking in terror. The servant is so mired in debt that it would take him hundreds of years to pay the king back what he owes. He is terrified because the king has the power and the right to throw him into debtor’s prison for the rest of his life. He stands on the precipice of utter ruin and loss of freedom.

As the accounts are read, the king prepares to lay claim to this man's house and all his possessions and auction them off to the highest bidder. He is even entitled to apprehend this man—along with his wife and children—and sell them into slavery to recoup his financial loss.

But the servant weeps before his king. He begs for mercy. And the heart of the king is moved. Astonishingly, rather than taking his pound of flesh, the king chooses to forgive his servant every ounce of his debt.

Filled with joy, the servant leaves the hall of the great king to go home. But along the way, he encounters a poor man who owes him a meager sum of money. In his newfound freedom and power, the servant of the king demands that the poor man pay up at once.

The poor man is unable to pay. He pleads for leniency. But the king's servant rages at the man who owes him, he violently chokes him, and even has the poor man thrown into debtor's prison.

Word of this injustice begins to travel through the city. The king's servants whisper to one another in disbelief until, finally, the king himself hears the story.

The king summons his servant yet again. But where there was once mercy, now the king burns with judgment. He rebukes his wicked servant, saying, *“How heartless you must be to one who has been forgiven so much yet refuses to forgive even a little?”*

In righteous wrath, he reinstates the servant's debt and commands his imprisonment until he repays all of what he owes down to the very last penny.

It is a story that reminds us that God is abundantly gracious and merciful. Yet, he is also just. And he is very serious when he calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven.

God calls his people to be more than *containers* of his amazing grace—we are to be *conduits* through which his grace flows into our broken world. And it is with that thought in mind that we can best understand the curious events of Jonah chapter 3.

We are now at the midpoint of the book of Jonah. After having rejected the call of God to go and preach in the city of Nineveh, Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord by boarding a boat that would sail to the very edge of the world.

For Jonah's disobedience, God sends a terrifying storm upon the vessel that Jonah uses to run from his call. As the boat is about to capsize, Jonah is awakened to the reality that *he* is the cause of the ship's peril.

He tells the pagan sailors to cast him into the sea. When they eventually do so, the waters are immediately stilled.

Yet, Jonah sinks further and further down into a watery grave, when suddenly he is swallowed whole by a great fish. And it is in the belly of the fish—knowing the depths of his need—that Jonah composes a prayer in which he vows to worship and obey God.

So God spares his wayward prophet from death and judgment.

But now Jonah will be called to go to Nineveh yet again. The prophet Jonah is an unworthy recipient of grace, and he will now be called to be an emissary of that grace to an undeserving people. And through the events that transpire in Nineveh, God will reveal himself to be a God of *fierce justice* and a God of *shocking mercy*.

Our passage is organized under two main sections that are about: **1.) Jonah's Begrudging Obedience, and 2.) Nineveh's Heartfelt Repentance**. And we will walk through both these sections, we will discover what they reveal about the character of God.

Exposition

1.) Jonah's Begrudging Obedience

After having been cast into the waters for his rebellion, God appoints a big fish to swallow Jonah whole and bring him back toward his calling. Jonah has just finished crying out to God from the depths of the sea and the depths of his sin. The prayer of chapter 2 is beautiful and moving. It is filled with rich and orthodox truth.

But though Jonah vows to worship and obey God, if you look back at Jonah's prayer carefully, he never really expresses true repentance. Technically, never says he is sorry, owns his mistake, or commits to love his enemies.

In other words, has come a long way from where his story began, but he still has a long way to go.

Our passage begins with a fairly graphic but also somewhat comical scene. God speaks not to his prophet Jonah but to the *fish* [show **1.Jonah Returned to Shore**]. And the fish "*vomits*" Jonah out onto dry land. You get the idea that God is gracious to Jonah, he loves Jonah, but he is *in no sense impressed* with Jonah.

In fact, God has a long-standing habit of saving the unimpressive and the unworthy. Back in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the Lord goes out of his way to remind the people of his Israel that he has chosen them to be his people not because of their inherent goodness or greatness, *despite* it.

He says to Israel, "**For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to**

your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut 7:6–8).

And God’s lack of being impressed with his people shouldn’t discourage us. It should *encourage* us. It means foolishness and failure do not remove us from the opportunity to experience God’s grace. Indeed, the more aware we are of our insufficiency, the more susceptible we are to God’s power and might working through us.

God is not done with Jonah. And if you have messed up, if you have fallen into the depths, if you’ve been out of church for a long time and coming back feels like being vomited onto a beach, you need to know *God is not done with you either*. As long as you draw breath, it is never too late to change and experience the transforming power of grace.

Jonah is *saved*, but he is not yet *sanctified*. So too, know that even if all you have is a mustard seed of faith in Jesus, you have been saved, you have been forgiven, and you have been redeemed and rescued from the power of sin and death.

But none of us are completely sanctified. We still have a long ways to grow and mature in Christ. In the world of theology, we call this “*progressive sanctification*.” It’s a big fancy term that means that God doesn’t just want to rescue us from sin; he intends to lead us into righteousness. He is committed to conforming us to the very image of Christ in the way we think, speak, and live our lives (cf. Rom 8:29).

You could say that Jonah chapter 3 is where Jonah’s progressive sanctification begins.

So the story resumes at verse 1 of chapter 3, “*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’” (Jonah 3:1–2).*

Despite Jonah’s disobedience, the will of the Lord for both Jonah and the city of Nineveh is steadfast. Having learned his lesson the hard way, Jonah submits to the will of the God who calls him. A verse 3, “*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 3:3).*

Yet, I think it is crucial to remember just how difficult it would have been for Jonah to go to this particular city at this particular moment. Nineveh, after all, is the capital city of *Assyria*—the most powerful and brutal empire that the world had ever seen up until this point in history.

The Assyrians believed that they were invincible in battle and that it was their divine mandate to expand their rule and reign. They would overwhelm cities and entire nations and cruelly oppress them. If a city resisted conquest, the Assyrians would gather up the surviving soldiers and chop off their limbs and castrate them. In one case, the Assyrians

decapitated every male of a defeated city from the age of adolescence and older and then made a stack of human heads outside of the city that was as high as a tower.¹

But even those who yielded to Assyrian conquest without resistance met a terrible fate [show 2Assyrian Resettlement]. They were forcibly deported from their homeland and moved to foreign territories to perform hard labor. In sum, Assyria was a monstrous empire built on terror and cruelty.

Jonah loved his nation of Israel. And he knew very much that Assyria had Israel in its crosshairs of bloodthirst and conquest. In fact, Assyria was perhaps the single greatest external threat to his home and his people.

I say this to say there is a *reason* that Jonah is reticent to go to Nineveh. There is a reason he still holds animosity and hatred toward the capital city of Assyria and the people within it.

From the outside looking in, a Hebrew prophet walking into the heart of Assyria to confront and challenge its center of power would be as unexpected and absurd as a Ukrainian preacher walking into the Red Square of Moscow and speaking out against the violence of the Russian regime.

Objectively speaking, Jonah is on the wrong side of an unbalanced power differential, speaking an uncomfortable truth to a people he has every reason to hate. But Jonah now knows better than to refuse the will of an almighty God.

So he goes to Nineveh. He preaches to the Ninevites.

But his sermon...is *truly terrible*.

Let's take a look at the content of his sermon: "*Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'"* (Jonah 3:4).

Recently, our church hosted a training event for preachers and teachers. As a church, we care a lot about training people to teach the word of God in a way that is faithful, effective, and compelling.

If I were to describe things that I always want to see in a sermon, I would say a good sermon should engage both the mind and the heart. It should be clear in what it is saying and clear in the response that it is trying to create. It should bring convicting truth but in a way that points to hope. It should be practically applicable to life, and—above all—a good sermon should point us to the glorious *God of the gospel*.

¹ Erika Belibtreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *Biblical Archeology Society*, (January/February 1991), 5–6.

Jonah's sermon does *none* of this [show 3Jonah Preaching]: “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” There is no good news—only bad news. There is no rationale given for the coming destruction—only a declaration that destruction is coming. There is not a clear call to action. There is no hope. Most importantly, there is not even a single reference to *God*. And just so you know, if you listen to an entire sermon that never references God, that is a *very bad* sermon.

Jonah appears to have preached the bare minimum of what God has told him to say. Perhaps, he wants to stack the deck against Nineveh. Perhaps, he hates these people so much that he wants to make it as hard as possible for them to understand him and repent from their wicked ways.

Nevertheless, even though Jonah's sermon is terrible, God moves powerfully through his words. And if God can spark a spiritual awakening through an imperfect sermon by an imperfect preacher, you better believe that he can move through your words too.

In fact, if you are a Christian believer, and especially if you are a member of Redeemer Christian Church, I want to challenge you to share your faith with someone at least one time between now and Easter. Tell them why you believe and how Christ has given you hope. Invite them to come to church with you.

Maybe you have never shared your faith. Maybe you feel like you don't know how to share your faith. If that is you, I want to challenge you to come to the Everyday Mission class that we are having at the end of the month. We will equip you to share your faith.

But even if you attend this class and you are still afraid to mess up, I want to encourage you. It is almost impossible that anything you would say to your friends or co-workers would be as bad as Jonah's sermon to Nineveh!

I am constantly amazed in the way that God will use our imperfect words to accomplish his perfect will. There have been times when I feel that one of my sermons is clumsy and unclear, yet people will tell me that the Lord used my words to give them exactly what they needed at that moment.

God's power is not most displayed by our eloquence or impressiveness. God's power is displayed in our weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9).

In fact, even though Jonah's words prophesy doom and disaster, there is a fascinating *irony* to Jonah's word choice in his less-than-ideal sermon. He says, “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*”

The word that is translated as “overthrown” (נִהְיָה) is an ambiguous word that can mean either “*be destroyed*” or “*be transformed*.” In other words, Jonah thinks he is foretelling Nineveh's *destruction*. But instead, he is prophesying Nineveh's *transformation*. And that leads us to the second section of this passage.

2.) Nineveh's Heartfelt Repentance

Despite Jonah's best attempts to sabotage his own mission, the word of God goes forth from Jonah's lips into the hearts of the Ninevites. It is a hard message to hear, but it provokes a definitive response. Through Jonah, God confronts the people of Nineveh so that he might save them. He shines forth a vision of severity and judgment. But ultimately, that vision of divine justice is a doorway to divine mercy.

Our text reads, *"And the people of Nineveh believed God" (Jonah 3:5a).*

This could not have been a more shocking turn of events. The people of Nineveh "*believed.*" The word used here (נִאֲמְנִי) is the exact same word used in Genesis 15:6 when Abraham—the great patriarch of the Israelite people—"believed" (נִאֲמַן) the Lord, and it was counted to him as righteousness. This is more than mere belief. This is *faith*—faith that leads to action, faith that leads to salvation, faith that is usually only associated with the people of God!

Even more, the faith of the Ninevites sparks a cascading reaction of movement toward humility and repentance. Look at all of the action verbs in the next few sentences: *"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" (Jonah 3:b5–6).*

This is not just an isolated instance of spiritual worship. This is the language of a city-wide revival that men and women, old and young, wealthy and poor, powerful and weak all experience together—all in the heart of a violent, power-hungry empire! To the original readers or hearers of this story, *this* event—not the stilled storm, not the great fish—would have been viewed as the greatest and most *impossible* miracle of the entire book.

The king of Nineveh even issues a royal decree of fasting and prayer. Our passage recounts, *"And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, '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'" (Jonah 3:7–8).*

Even though Jonah does not mention God, the people of Nineveh know that they have sinned against him. And even though Jonah never tells them how to repent, the king knows that they must turn from evil ways and violence.

This is important to understand that the people we might find the most wicked, the most irredeemable, the least likely to have any interest in God might be closer to salvation than we could ever realize.

In the New Testament book of Romans, the Apostle Paul teaches that to be human is to have, at some level, an inherent awareness of the divine. Even if it is doubted or suppressed, humans have been confronted with the ever-present reality of God.

We intuitively know that there is one to whom we owe our being and to whom we are obligated to serve. This is why the vast majority of all humans in all of history—from every culture and on every continent—have had some sort of spirituality, some sort of religious expression to acknowledge that which is transcendent.

This innate knowledge of God’s existence is why we grieve when the world is not the way it should be—because we intuitively know that there is a way that the world *should* be; a way that God *made* it to be. It’s why we know that all meaning and morality are more than human inventions. It is why we recognize goodness, truth, and beauty; and it is also why we recoil from their opposites.

At our core, we know that there is not just a difference between what is good and what is evil. We know that there is a sense of moral *obligation* to do what is right and to say what is true. That sense of moral obligation is impossible outside of the existence of a personal God who is the standard and judge of what is right and true.

However, just because we all have this knowledge does not mean we all worship God. In fact, the reality of the fallen human condition is that we, by nature, resist and resent God’s Lordship.

As Romans 1 tells us, We actively “*suppress the truth*” of God in our hearts and minds because we do not like the ramifications of that truth (cf. Rom 1:18–25).

Several years ago, back when I was a college minister living in Canyon, my wife Kate and I would go to a gym. At this gym worked a manager who I really enjoyed talking to. He was super smart and super thoughtful, but he was adamant about denying the existence of God.

When he learned I was a Christian minister, he liked to pick arguments with me and tell me about the philosophical objections he had against belief in God. Philosophy is right in my wheelhouse, so I was more than willing to hear him out and have long, detailed discussions with him in hopes that I might lead him to the Lord. But it always seemed like it was one step forward and two steps backward in our conversations.

But one day, I went to the gym, and after I barely made it through the door, the manager met me and asked me if I could meet with him in his office. Even though he was strong and almost always confident, in that moment, his face looked terrified. He told me that the previous night he felt like he had experienced something he could only describe as a spiritual attack. Suddenly, all of his rational arguments didn’t matter anymore. He knew he needed God.

So I prayed for him. I shared Scripture with him. And to make a long story short, he became a Christian believer. I even had the privilege of baptizing him and officiating his wedding.

And that instance has always reminded me that it's not our job to rationally argue people into salvation. It is simply our job to be faithful, to live out our faith with integrity, and to be ready to give the reason for the hope we have in Christ (cf. 1 Pet 3:15). The Holy Spirit is the one who changes hearts and brings forth life in his own time and in his own way. As Jonah declared at the end of chapter 2, "*Salvation belongs to the Lord.*"

Conclusion

The people of Nineveh sincerely turn away from evil, and they turn toward God. After issuing a time of fasting, prayer, and contrition, the king asks a question of uneasy hope, "*Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish*" (Jonah 3:9).

Notice how profound this is. The entire city of Nineveh turns toward God just at the mere *chance* of salvation. The king's only hope is that God *might* see his people's sorrow over their sins. He hopes that God *might* honor their fast and acknowledge their repentance. He hopes that God *might* show mercy and *might* spare this city from death and judgment.

But because of Jesus Christ, we have far more than a vague hope that God *might* show us mercy—we have a *promise*.

At the cross of Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself as a God of perfect justice and perfect mercy. He is just in that he will not endure the existence of evil. He will judge the sin of this world. But God is merciful in that he has made a way to end the power of sin without ending us.

Because Christ has died for our sins, because Christ has risen from the dead, because Christ is coming again, we can have the *certain* hope that when we turn toward God, we will encounter a God who will not destroy us but *transform* us!

There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus because Christ has taken all condemnation cf. Rom 8:1). He has taken all our shame. He has taken all of our judgment so that we might receive mercy.

We have been forgiven much, and that is why we must forgive—even those that we would call our enemies. We have been recipients of unfathomable grace, and that is why we must be emissaries of that same grace to a violent and wicked world in need of the hope of the gospel.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who rejoice in the justice and mercy of our God. May we be eager to go where he calls us. May we marvel before the power of our God, who saves the unlikely and the unworthy.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

1. Read Jonah 2:9—3:9. Summarize what happens in this section of the story in your own words.
2. Though Jonah has been rescued from certain death, there are many ways that he still needs to mature. In this way, the story of Jonah can be seen as a picture of “progressive sanctification.” What is “progressive sanctification,” and why is this concept important for Christians to understand?
3. Review the content of Jonah's sermon in Jonah 3:4. While Jonah's sermon isn't the best, the Lord uses Jonah's word to spark a spiritual revival in Nineveh. How might this encourage you to share your faith with those you would expect to reject God's word?
4. The Ninevites repent because they believe there is a chance that God *might* show them mercy. Why can we have much greater confidence that our repentance will be met by God's mercy? What is the source of our hope for God's mercy?