

## Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Revival

Jonah 3:1-10

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Now turn with me in your copies of God's Word to the book of Jonah, chapter 3. Jonah chapter 3 - page 775 in the church Bibles. Before we read let's turn to the Lord in prayer. Let's pray.

*O Lord our God, we come confessing how low the fires of devotion and zeal for Your glory in our hearts are often allowed to burn. We come to You acknowledging how prone our hearts are to wander. Lord, we feel it. We come to You confessing, though we believe Your Word to be true and sweeter than honey from the comb, more precious than gold, a light to our path, a lamp to our feet, we still take detour after detour down blind dark alleys; we wander away. And so as we come confessing our proneness to disobedience, we come also crying out, "O Lord, rend the heavens and come down and visit the assembly of Your people and take Your holy Word and inflame our hearts with new devotion and zeal for Your honor and delight in Your truth." Revive Your work, O Lord, in the midst of the years. For those who are strangers to saving grace, gracious God, tonight, by Your Word, summon them from death to life and grant them the gifts of faith to receive and rest on Christ in true repentance, to forsake all others and to cling to Him alone. So hear us, visit us, and bless to us the ministry of Your Word for the renown of the name of Jesus alone. Amen.*

Jonah chapter 3 from verse 1. This is the Word of Almighty God:

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.'

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God relented of the disaster that he said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy Word.

### **Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Great Revival in Nineveh**

Salvation belongs to the Lord. That's the great declaration that stands as a banner over the whole of the book of Jonah. God alone saves whom He wills, when He wills, how He wills. It was uttered, if you will remember, with fervency, doubtless with no small degree of relief by the prophet Jonah in the belly of the great fish having himself been made the recipients of God's saving sovereignty, plucked from Sheol, from the grave, and delivered. He was, if you will remember, he was commanded to go to Nineveh but Jonah, instead, took ship to go to Tarshish. Pagans, it seems, are not welcome in Jonah's version of the kingdom of God and so he refused to become "Jonah, the apostle to the Ninevites," and he fled. And yet God displayed extraordinary mercy in disciplining and delivering his wayward prophet by means of the great fish who spit Jonah at the end of chapter 2 once more onto dry land.

And tonight as we turn our attention to the third chapter we find it is a chapter in which the climactic declaration, "Salvation belongs to the Lord," now takes center stage. Our attention focuses much less now on Jonah, God's wayward servant, and much more on the Lord, Jonah's gracious Savior. I want you to notice three things in the passage with me. First in verses 1 to 3 and then again down in verse 10, like bookends on either side of the text, we learn about the God who relents. The God who relents. Then in verse 4, secondly, we meet the God who rebukes. The God who rebukes. And then in 5 to 9, the God who revives. There is a great revival in Nineveh. The God who relents, the God who rebukes, and the God who revives.

#### **I. The God Who Relents**

First of all the God who relents. Compare verses 1 to 3 of chapter 3 with the first three verses of chapter 1 for a moment and you will see immediate and striking

similarities. Almost identical language is used. Jonah stands now once again on dry land and, “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.” The same call comes a second time to Jonah. He’s commissioned once more for the same ministry. Jonah, remember, had defected, hadn’t he? He had abandoned his post. He had run away utterly betraying the sacred trust given to him as a prophet of the Lord and a preacher of the Word of God. He’d fled to Tarshish. And here now, however, he stands back again on familiar shores chastened and compliant. The similarities between the opening verses of chapter 3 and the opening verses of the whole book of Jonah in chapter 1 are entirely intentional of course as though the Lord here in chapter 3 has hit the re-set button. We’re back at the beginning once again. Having saved Jonah from death, God now re-commissions him for ministry. Jonah gets another chance - “The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.”

### **The Rod of Discipline and the Caress of Grace**

We’ve seen several times already as we’ve worked through the book of Jonah that although the prophet has run from the Lord, the Lord will not let the prophet go. The Lord is not done with Jonah. He’s at work in his life to discipline him and bring him back to faithfulness. But here we see God at work to restore Jonah, not just to personal faithfulness, but also to public usefulness. Jonah has failed badly but God is restoring him again. Jonah, as we saw last time, has not yet actually repented. And yet God is showering him with mercy nevertheless. Sometimes when God seeks to awaken us to the sin still festering in our hearts, sometimes He will use the rod of providential discipline. That was what we saw happening in chapters 1 and 2 - the Lord disciplining Jonah in His providence. Sometimes He will send storms and tempests; sometimes like Jonah we’re thrown into the chaos of the raging sea. He does use the rod of discipline. But like the tender and wise Father He is, sometimes He also uses the caress of grace. If He only ever showed us the rod of discipline and never the caress of grace, we might easily lose sight of His loving heart. He wants to win Jonah and He wants to win you, so He will discipline you, believer in Jesus, but He will also woo you and shower on you undeserved, de-merited kindness, your sin notwithstanding, so that you might remember He is a God of mercy, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love so that we might begin once again to trust Him, not to flee from Him but to run to Him even with our sin and find Him ready to forgive and to receive us once again.

And in Jonah’s case, at this point in the story at least, the mixture of discipline and kindness seems to be working well. Whereas in chapter 1 as the call of God came to Jonah we see Jonah rising to flee from the presence of the Lord, this time as the same call comes to him the second time, he “arises to go to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord.” So far so good we might say. Jonah, at last, begins to obey. If you know the rest of the story of Jonah you’ll know there are

good reasons to doubt that Jonah really has changed at all. He is not a repentant man but here in chapter 3 that is not really our concern, certainly not the concern of the narrator. He wants our attention to rest not so much on assessing the condition of Jonah's heart at this point or the quality of his obedience at this point, as he wants us focusing instead on the character of the God who relents from wrath and instead shows mercy. "Behold, your God" He's saying to us. This is what He is like. He loves to save His people. Even when His people do not get it, do not obey as they ought, He showers on them His grace. He prefers grace to judgment. Do you believe that? He prefers grace to judgment. He is the God who relents.

### **Grace Freely Received; Grace Freely Shared**

That will be precisely the experience of the Ninevites themselves down in verse 10. As Jonah preaches the Word the Lord gives him, the people are profoundly convicted of their sin and they begin to repent. And verse 10 tells us, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God relented of the disaster that he said he would do to them, and he did not do it." Here's another one of those delicious ironies with which the book of Jonah is laced. The prophet of the Lord, Jonah, is an object lesson designed to teach him and the people for whom this book was written, God loves to show mercy. He loves to show mercy. If He saves an unrepentant, wayward prophet, will He not also save a repentant city that turns to Him for pardon? It's a lesson we need to remember too, isn't it? The Lord deals with Nineveh the same way He deals with Jonah. He doesn't have double standards, do you see - one just for us and another for everyone else. He does not deal with you as though you were a unique case, neither so bad that He cannot shower His grace upon you nor so good that He will not discipline you. He deals with you in the same way according to the same pattern with which He will deal with others. The same grace He gave you He'll give to others. It's a precious truth that should arm us to fight against exclusivity and insularity and the pride that so easily lurks in our own hearts. God is as free to bring others into His kingdom as He is to bring you. "You are not better than the Ninevites, Jonah. If I may have mercy on you, may I not relent from the disaster I purposed against them when they turned to Me?" Is not God free to show mercy on whomever He wills? Don't you see how helpless your own case, apart from the intervention of the God who relents, has always really been? Why then should you be reluctant to serve Him in reaching others in a similar condition, whosoever they may be? Maybe tonight the Word of the Lord is coming to you the second time - a word of mercy after your fall, after your sin. But do you see from this passage that to whomever God shows mercy these He also calls to service. Grace is not to be kept to yourself. The message of comfort that our God is a God who relents is also a commissions for the God who relents is the God who sends. God isn't done with you yet. As He shows you mercy it is so that He might use you in others' lives also.

That's always the way that God works. Think, for example, Simon Peter. After

three times denying that He ever knew Him, three times the risen Jesus confronted the apostle Peter. “Do you love Me?” He said. And Peter affirmed his love for Christ and for each of his denials Christ issues a renewed commission. “Feed My lambs. Tend My sheep. Feed My sheep.” Like God’s mercy showered on wayward Jonah, Jesus showed Peter mercy, not just to forgive Peter but to make Peter an instrument of mercy in others’ lives also. That’s why our God is the God who relents. He shows mercy to make us instruments of mercy. The compassion of God always brings with it the commission of God. The grace you are given is grace you are to share.

## **II. The God Who Rebukes**

The secondly we learn here, don’t we, about the God who rebukes. The God who relents; then there’s the God who rebukes. Jonah begins his march into the city, about a day’s journey, and there he begins to preach. We have a one line summary of his preaching ministry in verse 4. It’s hardly the most heartwarming of messages. This is not “Your Best Life Now.” Look at it - verse 4. “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” It doesn’t seem like much of a message to us but look at the extraordinary effect that it produces on the Ninevites. A mighty revival, an awakening ensues in the wake of this, as it seems to us, rather abrupt message. So before we move on, we need to linger, I think, a little over Jonah’s preaching ministry finding out or asking ourselves why it has been so very effective. What is it about Jonah’s preaching that produces such mighty effects?

### **Preaching the Word of God**

And the first thing to say is that Jonah preached the Word of God. Jonah preached the Word of God. I wonder if you noticed as we read it together that Jonah’s commission in chapter 3 though almost identical is slightly different from the original commission back in chapter 1 verse 2. The first commission called Jonah to “Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and call out against it for their evil has come up before me.” But this time in chapter 3 verse 2 Jonah is told, “Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, call out against it the message that I will tell you.” The emphasis here is on the exact conformity of Jonah’s message to God’s instructions. Now given Jonah’s aptitude for disobedience, it’s an understandable clarification. Jonah is to say only what he’s given to say and nothing more. But doesn’t it also drive home the point that Jonah is not here to find some mechanism for producing an effect on the Ninevites. He’s not a manipulator of men. He is there simply to deliver a message. He is a herald. He is not editorializing. He is saying what God’s Word says - nothing more and nothing less. That’s why verse 5, as they listened to Jonah’s message, “the people of Nineveh believed God.” The people of Nineveh believed God. You feel the force of that? Jonah came preaching, but in that preaching God was talking. God was rebuking their sin. God was dealing with their hearts. That’s true preaching. The Word of God coming in demonstration of the Spirit and power; not in persuasive

words of human wisdom - 1 Corinthians 2 and verse 4. When the preacher says what God says God says it. The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. That is stunning. God is talking! God is talking. They did not believe Jonah. They heard Jonah preaching. They believed God. As Jonah delivered the message God Himself spoke to their hearts.

### **Preaching both Bad News and the Good News**

The other thing to say about Jonah's preaching ministry was that he preached the good news and the bad news, or the bad news and the good news. Look at the summary again in verse 4. "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." It all sounds entirely like bad news on the surface when you learn that in the Hebrew Scriptures the word Jonah uses to describe Jonah's fate, "overthrown," is inextricably bound up with the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah whom God utterly destroyed in Genesis 19. The dire implications of Jonah's preaching is strengthened even further. Like Sodom and Gomorrah before it, Jonah is saying Nineveh too is facing complete supernatural destruction from the hand of God. But this word "overthrown" you know is a double-entendre. It has two meanings. It can also mean "an inversion; a reversal; a turning upside down; an about face." It can even mean "a change of heart." So for example in Deuteronomy 23 and verse 5 we read, "The Lord your God turned" - that's the same word, "overthrown, turned around, inverted, transformed." "The Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the Lord your God loved you." As summaries go, the summary of Jonah's preaching ministry in verse 4 is a master class of brevity and clarity. In a single word the bad news is threatened, unrepentant hearts will face the wrath and curse of God, and the good news is proclaimed. If there is a turn of heart a great reversal will occur. The city will either be overthrown or turned around. It all depends on how they respond to the preaching of the Word of God.

### **The Voice of God Himself speaking in His Word**

As you hear God's Word preached this evening you are hearing God Himself. In so far as the preacher says what God says, God says it, which makes the preaching of the Word of God the most important thing you will hear all week long, the most important thing. There is not a proclamation made by a king or a president, however far reaching in its implications with the authority of the Word of God. There is no news broadcast shown on our television screens, however momentous its significance, that can bear the sheer weight of eternity that the Gospel of Jesus Christ carries. God Himself is speaking to you in the ministry of the Word. And so it becomes a matter of the most profound urgency. How will you respond as God calls you to repentance and to service?

Alec Motyer quotes the dedication of one of Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama's, books. It reads, "To the memory of Herbert G. Brand, through whose preaching in broken Japanese my grandfather was converted to Jesus Christ."

It's not the rhetorical skill of the preacher that changes lives do you see. It is the God who speaks by His Word even when it comes from poor lisping, stammering tongues. It wasn't Jonah's erudition. One wonders how the Ninevites understood this Hebrew prophet. Was his Ninevite as broken as Herbert Brand's Japanese? It was the Word of God attended by the Spirit and power of God that brought a change in their hearts and in their lives. That is what we need most - the voice of God speaking in Holy Scripture showing us Jesus, the only Savior of sinners. That's what we need to pray for, Lord's Day by Lord's Day. That is what you must demand from the preacher whenever he steps into the pulpit - not a pep talk, not an inspirational message, not a few thoughts on the latest problems of the day. Give us the pure, unadulterated Word of God and then plead with heaven that it might be attended with the blessing and presence of the Spirit of Christ. The God who relents and then the God who rebukes. It was God who was speaking in the preaching of Jonah.

### **III. The God Who Revives**

And then finally, the God who revives. God gives His Word power as Jonah preaches and the city responds. There is a great awakening in Nineveh. It isn't something organized and pre-arranged of course. The annual Ninevite Revival Committee did not book Jonah to come Tuesday through Thursday for the revival between six and eight. That is not a revival in any sense at all. A revival is something that God does in the hearts of people as they hear the Word of the Lord preached in demonstration of the Spirit in power. Look at what characterizes the awakening in Nineveh.

#### **Characteristics of True Revival: Faith**

First there is faith, verse 5. "The people of Nineveh believed God." Not just that they believed in Him; more than that. Even the devils have that kind of faith and tremble. We need more than faith that "God is." We need faith to rest on the God who alone saves. They believed Him. They trusted Him, His Word, His promises. It is not enough to believe in Jesus. You must believe Jesus! We must not merely acknowledge truths about Him - His life, His death, His person, His work. We must receive and rest upon Him as He is offered in the Gospel. That and nothing short of it is saving faith.

#### **Characteristics of True Revival: Deep and True Repentance**

And then secondly, along with faith there is a deep and true repentance - the universal corollary of saving faith. And these two, you know, are always found together, always, never apart. Wherever there is saving faith there is always a repentant heart. Whenever a sinner repents he does it believing the Gospel. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least. Those are the emblems of mourning. Even the king, when he hears the Word of the

Lord, is cut to the heart. Notice how he humbles himself. He steps away from the throne as though to acknowledge only God is the true sovereign. He disrobes and puts on sackcloth instead. He issues a royal decree. He calls the entire city to fast and, verse 8, “let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger that we may not perish.” That’s the content of their prayers. That’s the hope - timid, trembling to be sure, uncertain, maybe. In light of the gravity and filth of our sin, could it perhaps be that God will forgive? There is no presumption there; there is urgency. There is no false confidence but there is a real recognition of the sinfulness of sin; no attempt to leverage or manipulate the deity but they’re cast entirely on His grace as they forsake their rebellion and seek His pardon.

### **Taking Hold of God’s Mercy: Responding to the Word in Faith and Repentance**

And as they cried to God he heard and he answered. Do notice how the content of the prayer that the king calls for in verse 9 corresponds precisely to the content of God’s response to them in verse 10. “Turn from your evil ways,” the king said. “God saw how they turned from their evil way,” verse 10. “Who knows?” the king said. “Maybe God will relent,” verse 9. “God relented,” verse 10. He conforms His response to the requests of these repentant pagans. It’s amazing. And it should be wonderfully reassuring to us all. Even Ninevites’ prayers take hold of the mercy of God when they respond to His Word in repentance and faith. Even Ninevites. The Lord never turned anyone away. However wicked and wayward they may be who came to Him seeking mercy, He never turned anyone away; not Ninevites, not you, who came to Him seeking mercy. Jesus Christ bore our sins in His body on the tree. He died the just for the unjust to bring us to God. God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. That is the good news. Sin has been paid for. Salvation won. Forgiveness purchased for every sinner who repents and believes. Acceptance before God for all who come seeking it from the hands of Christ. And when you come to Jesus, seeking His mercy, because of His person and work, because of all that He has done, you cannot be denied. God must save you because His Son has shed His blood for all and any who will to come and find pardon. The Lord never turned anyone away who came to Him seeking mercy - not Ninevites; not you. Won’t you come and seek mercy? Find forgiveness free and full in Jesus Christ.

### **Pleading for Awakening**

And when many hearts respond together like that to the Word of God, that’s a revival; that’s an awakening. Isn’t that the great need of our church, of our city, where the Word of God is attended with unusual power and grips the hearts of all who hear so that men and women, boys and girls, are brought first into deep conviction of sin and then, by God’s grace, to faith and repentance? It’s the work

of God alone. Only He can do it; we can't work it up. We can't manufacture it. When He pours out the Spirit on the preached Word and Christ is displayed in His sufficiency to save, nothing can stop the preaching of the Gospel, nothing. How we need to pray for such a great awakening in this great city whose evil has come up before the Lord, our city of Jackson, as we too hear and begin to obey the commission of the Lord, having ourselves received mercy to go and be instruments of mercy among our friends and neighbors and in our communities. Plead with God that His Word, as it is proclaimed, might be attended with power and that He might rend the heavens and come down and revive His work in the midst of the hearers. The God who relents, the God who rebukes, and the God who revives. How we need such a revival today. Would you make it a matter of urgent, pleading prayer that as the Word of God is preached in our day, as the bad news and the good news is proclaimed, God might bless it and many might be brought to know Christ?

Let's pray together.

*O our Father, how we pray for true revival, for awakening, that the preaching of the Word of God might bear great fruit in the lives of Your people and through Your people in the lives of many others who hear of the unsearchable riches of Christ. Come and have mercy on us and then use us as instruments of mercy on others. For we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.*

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