

Jonah 3:3-4:4 June 30, 2013

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." ¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. ¹ But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"

Praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort,

It's not strange that today we'd use the account of a "formerly washed up" prophet from about 28 centuries ago. Jonah's account of a tumultuous time in his life reminds us of the type of love and commitment our Lord shows to each of us individually. Jonah covers a lot of ground. We learn timeless truths from his journey. I pray that each of us may see ourselves in Jonah and learn from how the Lord dealt with him.

Let's start with a "word association." Call out the first thing that comes to mind when I say... **[PP slide]** "Jonah." **[Wait for responses.]**

Take a look at this. **[PP slide]** If you haven't seen one before, it's called a "word cloud." It groups together the most often used words in the book of Jonah. The larger the word is in the grouping, the more times it is used in the book. What do people most associate with Jonah from the Bible? (Fish) Take a look at the word "fish." See how small it is! The great fish is only mentioned 4 times in the book of Jonah. God is most prominent: most specifically the name "LORD"!

Are we getting the heart of this book of the Bible if the fish – and its miraculous actions – are what we see most prominently? The message of the book of Jonah is:

What length the LORD will go to (he is totally committed)... to seek wayward people - to forgive repentant individuals - and then, to repeat the process.

What is the next most prominent word in the book of Jonah? "*Jonah.*" Getting into the details of his story, let's set the context: (ch.1) "*The word of the Lord came to Jonah: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh – our next largest word in the cloud - and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'*"

The Lord called. Jonah ran. **[image on PP]** A storm arose. Jonah's thrown overboard. A great fish swallowed him... **[image]** ... mercifully... then later spit him up on shore **[image]**. It took staring at the inside of a fish's belly to turn Jonah around.

Before you start scratching your head, saying “What were you thinking, Jonah?”... at least consider this: If you’d mention “Ninevah,” the capital of Assyria, to people of the ancient world, their blood probably would have run cold. These were cruel, wicked, warlike people. They were excessively brutal to their victims: chopping off their hands, putting out eyes, pulling out tongues, even impaling them on stakes. And the Lord told Jonah: “Go and preach to them.” What the Lord had asked Jonah to do was hard – very hard.

Jonah didn’t want to listen to God. He tried to run in the opposite direction from him. He may have had all sorts of arguments in mind to justify his disobedience. “It’s obvious, Lord!”, he may have reasoned as he ran, “Assyria is Israel’s biggest threat to national security! They want to crush us! And why didn’t you call me at this time to preach to my own people in Israel! There are so many lost people there!”

You see, when the Lord called Jonah to preach against Nineveh, it is not that Jonah thought to himself: “They might not like what I have to say, and I might get it from them!” We, in ch.4, have insight into Jonah’s heart, which shows us that he understood something correctly: the Lord’s compassion. “What if I preach against them, and they listen?” Jonah did not want to be used by God to spare Nineveh, so that the Assyrians could be around to later come down upon Israel. Jonah didn’t even want to think about the possibility of the Ninevites repenting & the Lord sparing them.

So Jonah ran. But the Lord wouldn’t simply let him go. **The Lord** stirred up the sea with a great wind. **“The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah.”** Just think of him sitting in the smelly darkness of a fish’s belly for 3 days! From inside the fish - Chapter 2 reveals – Jonah prays a confession to the Lord ~ Jonah repented. The culmination of his prayer declares: “Salvation comes from the Lord.” And... *“The Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”* Then in 3:1: *“The word of the **Lord** came to **Jonah** a second time: ‘Go to the great city of **Nineveh** and proclaim to it the message I give you.’”*

The Lord would use this renegade-turned-around prophet. Isn’t it amazing! The **Lord** gave **Jonah** a clean slate & a second chance! Forgiven is his past - the Lord didn’t even bring it up. The Lord had not written Jonah off. He was not a washed-up runaway. He was a washed clean child of God, & **the Lord** would use **him** as his prophet. He sent him to...

A great city. The fact that the Ninevites were not Israelites didn’t hinder the Lord’s gracious will. Here is the truth from 2 Peter 3:9 shown on the pages of the Old Testament. **[PP slide]** *“The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”*

And therein lies the crucial issue for all of us: repentance. The Lord calls to wayward people. He calls to wayward people yet today: the Jonahs of the world, and the Assyrians of the world: Repent.

So the Lord – in Jonah’s day – sent the people of Nineveh living, breathing, walking-among-them proof of His grace. Jonah had quite the story to tell: oh how the Lord had shown compassion to him personally! His story could be their story: Our God looks for the wayward & forgives those who confess their sin & trust in him for forgiveness.

So: What happened after Jonah walked through the city & shared the Lord’s message? The people of Nineveh repented. They sincerely were sorry for their wickedness. Shocked that these brutal sadistic

people could change? This is a testament to the power of our Lord & to the power of His Word. . . If He could turn around them, He can turn around anyone!

The Lord's response? 3:10 shares the most beautiful words the two eyes of any sinful human being could ever take in: "*he had compassion.*" The Lord had compassion.

And Jonah's response to that? Jonah didn't rejoice. Jonah got upset at this outcome. Literally, the Hebrew in 4:1 says: "But it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and his anger burned." He said, "*O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*"

"What?!" You may be thinking. "I thought God got through to Jonah!" Well, he did. But somewhere along the way, by the time his job of preaching was through, his sinful nature battled to re-exert its influence over Jonah: "See, I told you this was going to happen! How can this be good for your people." Jonah listened to his sinful nature's appeal. Jonah's old feelings returned. He sat outside Nineveh, unwilling to commit himself to the Lord's cause. He may have felt, "I shouldn't feel this way about lost people, but I can't help myself." Whatever the case of his feelings, he lost sight of the fact: his sin and rebellion were just as evil as theirs. Unless corrected Jonah was in danger of dying himself - spiritually.

So... in ch.4 the story of the Lord's compassion is repeated: The Lord sought the wayward. The Lord, who had already shown compassion to Jonah, then Nineveh, returns to Jonah... yet once again. Marvel at the sight!

The Lord said: "*Jonah, do you have any right to be angry?*" It is as if the Lord said, "If I had dealt with you – Jonah – the way you deserved, where would you be?" [The rest of ch.4 tells the Lord's masterfully taught lesson, as Jonah sat himself east of the city.] The Holy Spirit cut away his sinful, rebel reasoning. Jonah understood.

Jonah wrote down his account: not just the good things, but the not so flattering too. In the end, by the time of his writing, the Lord had led him to desire – that no one would perish, regardless of who or what they were, but that everyone would come to repentance. His account would tell that for future generations to hear.

And so we come to you and me today. You see the point of our journey with Jonah? Here – in you and me – is living, breathing, walking proof of the Lord's compassion. By now I'm sure you understand we are not here for a "bash on Jonah fest." We benefit from Jonah's story when we reflect on the times our personal stories have mirrored his. The Lord leads us, like Jonah, to give open honest acknowledgement of our waywardness:

- Our times of allowing self-preservation to override God's will & concern for others.
- Our times of prideful judgment ~ when we, quite frankly, have felt anything less than complete love for lost people. Maybe we've even felt: "I know I shouldn't feel the way I do about them, but I can't help myself." You see how that relates to: losing sight of our own sin being just as bad as theirs.

- The times we have reasoned, “This doesn’t make sense to me. The Lord is asking something I can’t rationalize, or do.” So we’ve ignored and run from His Word, rather than commit to the Lord’s will.
- Then, when our Lord has graciously brought us back into alignment with his good will... the times we’ve returned to our old feelings at our sinful nature’s twisting of our ear/heart.

The fact that this group – myself included as chief among us – is gathered under this roof this morning is a clear testament to the Lord’s compassion. He has consistently called us to repent, when we’ve run headlong into sin. He knows that unless corrected we are in danger of dying spiritually. So he corrects us with His Word. And each time, when he’s brought you to see your sin and your need for forgiveness in Christ, he has assured you from His Word: “I have cleansed you from your sin in my own blood. Forgiven is your past, my dear child.” Ah, what sweet news!

Did you know: Jesus, our Lord, used Jonah to point us to His saving love for us? Listen to this connection Jesus makes:

- ✠ (Luke 11:29-32) “As Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be a sign to this generation...”
- ✠ (Matthew 12:39-41) “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth... now One greater than Jonah is here.”

Greater than Jonah, for Jonah was not dead in the belly of the fish like our Lord Jesus, who was dead and buried in his grave. Greater than Jonah, for Jonah didn’t free himself from the jaws that held him in, like our Lord Jesus, who on the third day tore open the jaws of the grave and raised himself to life – just as he said he would. “One greater than Jonah is here.” And I mean literally: He is here - today. For our Lord Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again. He is here with you, as he has promised. And, oh, what length our Lord goes to every day to keep us in the one, saving faith.

That great news just makes you want to follow & serve him! Right? Absolutely! And so we’ve come all the way through to the theme of our service for this Sunday, answering for a 2nd week: What’s life like for a follower of Christ? Our answer today is: total commitment.

The new person of faith in us, as we heard in Galatians (earlier in our service), wants whole-heartedly to follow in step with the Holy Spirit. We fight sin. When we fall, we repent, for sin is “what we do not want” to do. Why is that? We read the truth that, in Christ, we are free from sin’s guilt and curse. And freed, we gladly serve our Savior. We know the huge debt of our sin the Lord took upon himself. And knowing that, we’re able to love others – even those who don’t love us. The Lord’s love creates in us this love & trust in Him, and gives us the confidence to pray boldly: “Your will be done. Your kingdom come: to us, and to others. Keep our will in line with your gracious will, and use us to communicate your truth to whomever you put us into contact. Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with God’s People. Amen. (Revelation 22)