

“Boundless Compassion”

Jonah 3:1-10

May 26, 2024

In 1995 a series of revivals swept across college campuses. Northwestern College, where Pauline and I were attending was one of the campuses visited by this move of God.

We went to chapel at 10 am in the morning, heard a couple testimonies from other couple students, and then experience a spontaneous, supernatural encounter with God. It was not manufactured. It was not driven by hype. Just a divine weight of heaviness that produced an inescapable conviction of sin. It felt as though we might be crushed in our chairs by the heaviness that was only replaced with comfort and joy as students got up one by one to confess their sins and be prayed for by one another.

Chapel never ended that day. Over the course of the next several days, students were born again and many set free from the bondage of sin. Moments like these are rare among God’s people, but when God brings revival or spiritual awakening as He did in Jonah 3, we experience the boundless compassion of God extending mercy to undeserving sinners through His life-transforming word.

What we are going to see in Jonah 3 is nothing short of spectacular. Yet if you were a Jew in Jonah’s day, it would be more than spectacular. It would be shocking. What we are about to see is God extending compassion and mercy to those least expected—not just isolated individuals, but an entire population known for their violence and evil. As we will see next week, this is so shocking that it offended Jonah’s sense of justice.

After 2000 years of church history, we are accustomed to the idea of God’s grace being offered to all the world through the gospel. This was not an entirely new concept with the birth of the church. Even under the Old Covenant, Israel was to be God’s servant and light to the nations. Through Abraham’s children, all the nations of the world were to be blessed. Yet it was very difficult for the OT saints to not have an “us” vs. “them” mentality.

Gentiles were considered unclean and pagan nations were most often viewed as a sub-class of people in comparison to God’s chosen people.

It might be helpful at the outset of this message for you to ask yourself, “who might I consider to be the “them” of our world today?” Is it those from a revival nation? Those from an opposing political party? Those who are tampering with traditional biblical views of gender and sexuality? Or perhaps it is someone who has deeply hurt you. Do we really believe that God’s compassion and mercy is for all who repent? Are there some you would never believe possible to repent?

The reason our Jonah series (and today’s message) is called “Boundless Compassion” is because there are no geographical limits or even degrees of sin that are beyond God’s compassion for those who come to terms with their need to repent of their sin and believe in Christ. Yet I should clarify that boundless does not mean unconditional. Repentance and faith are the conditions established by God for those who receive His saving grace. The Ninevites seemed beyond the bounds of God’s gracious mercy. It seemed they should rather be recipients of his justice and wrath. Yet God sent His word through Jonah to call them to repentance, so that He could demonstrate the shocking boundlessness of His mercy.

The heart of today’s passage is this: **God’s boundless compassion is expressed in mercy to all who repent of their sin.**

Oh, church, as we see the boundless compassion of God, even on the Ninevites, it is meant to shake us up and awaken us to our own need to repent earnestly of our sin. Remember that while Ninevah is focus of God’s compassion in Jonah, the book was recorded as a crucial lesson for God’s people. Lee and I were discussing after church last Sunday that in chapter 2:8 when Jonah says, “Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love,” it was a rebuke to Israel who at that time was steeped in idolatry. The radical repentance of the Ninevites is a rebuke to God’s people who are slow to repent of their idolatry and sin. So get ready to be amazed and jolted by the boundless compassion and mercy of God who relents of His judgment on all who have ears to hear and repent of their sin—regardless of the degree of wickedness from which they turn.

[Jonah 3:1-10]

If you have been with us for the last couple weeks, vs. 1-2 should sound very familiar. They are a near replica of [1:1-2]. [3:1-3] The similarities as well as the differences between chapters 1 & 3 are insightful. First, God does not abandon his will or plan when we fail to obey Him. Second, God could have moved on to another prophet to accomplish His work in Ninevah, but he wasn't done with His work in Jonah yet. And so we see here another marvelous example that God is a God of second chances. He gives Jonah another opportunity to obey. So here's a...

Big Truth: God will not abandon His will because of our disobedience, but He will give us second chances to obey His will.

When our kids were younger and disobeyed us, like Jonah, it resulted in discipline and then another "opportunity" to obey. Disobedience is never an effective way to escape God's will. Disobedience only enhances God's will with discipline.

Of all people, we who have experienced the rebirth, should rejoice in the God of second chances. Yet we should not only rejoice that God gives us a second chance, but also give grace to others who also need a second chance. One of the big truths we learn from Jonah is that...

Big Truth: Those who receive divine mercy are in no position to begrudge or withhold mercy from others.

Yet you may ask, "how many second chances should I give?" Or as Peter asked Jesus, "how many times should I forgive?" Jesus said, "not seven, but seventy times seven" (Mt 18:21-22). Who in your life do you need to extend grace to for a second chance? Will you give grace, or will you hold a grudge?

Perhaps it is because of Jonah's disobedience the first time, that God changes what he says to Jonah in 3:2: "Arise, go to Ninevah, that great city, and all out against it *the message that I tell you.*" There seems to be an implicit warning or reminder that Jonah doesn't get to choose for himself

what message he will speak to Ninevah. In fact, it is never the preacher's job or privilege to proclaim his own ideas. His only job and his sacred privilege is to represent the fundamental meaning of God's word in what he says. He may use his own words, but the truth they proclaim must be God's, and never contrary!

Doesn't vs. 2 remind you of those times when a parent gives a child specific instructions and the child decides they know a better way to do it? Yet when the child discovers that his better way was not so better, the parent gives him an opportunity to do it over but this time with a, "do just what I tell you to do." We don't get to say, "I've got a better idea than what God has said." So we don't tamper with salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. We don't tamper with God's requirement of repentance from sin. We don't get to tamper with God's code of relationships. We don't get to redefine God's word on gender or sexuality, or whatever else many in the church today believe they have a better idea about.

The way for you to discern good preaching is when the preacher demonstrates that what he says is governed by God's word rather than his own ideas. Likewise, Jonah doesn't get to decide where the line is between God's justice and mercy. Nor do we get to reorder God's design for our lives or the church or our families.

So what does Jonah do with his second chance? [vs. 3] "According to the word of the Lord" means Jonah obeyed God, at least outwardly. There is another big truth here:

Big Truth: Accepting Yahweh's salvation, means accepting Yahweh's mission.

Jonah had been saved in the belly of the fish, and he had learned from God's discipline that salvation is meant to put us on a road of obedience to participate in God's mission of mercy. The same is true for us today to have believed the gospel, repented of our sin and been saved from the wrath of God. Salvation is not just a free pass. Salvation equips us with the power of God's Spirit to obey His word and carry out His mission of the gospel. We are saved to walk in the fulness of God's will for our lives.

As we pick up the storyline in vs. 4-5 we are about to see the power of God's word to bring about spiritual awakening through repentance and faith. Vs. 5 summarizes Jonah's message: "Yet forty days, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" This is probably not all that Jonah said in his preaching, but it summarizes his message as one of warning—"Your sin has provoked God's judgment." Yet, as I pointed out earlier in our study, **when God confronts our sin or warns us of His judgment, it is a message of mercy calling us to repent.** Warnings of judgment are a manifestation of God's boundless compassion on all who will turn from their sin.

There was an interesting detail at the end of vs. 3, noting that Ninevah was such a great city that it took three days to journey across it. Yet, vs. 4 indicates that before Jonah was even a 3rd of the way through the city, God's word has such an impact, that the people of Ninevah put on sackcloth and began to fast. Why? Because "the people of Ninevah *believed God*" (vs. 5). That is, the words they heard from Jonah's mouth carried the weight of God Himself speaking! In vs. 6 we will discover an official fast declared by the king of Ninevah, but it appears from vs. 5 that the fast has already begun among the people as a spontaneous response to the weight of God's word. This is what often happens in times of revival and spiritual awakening. People sense the weightiness of God Himself in the preaching of His word and it presses them to spontaneously respond with radical repentance.

It is quite shocking that these hardened Ninevites would have such an immediate and radical response to Jonah's preaching. Some scholars have suggested that God had perhaps been preparing the Ninevites with events just prior to Jonah's preaching that would have raised concerns about divine judgment. For example, on June 15, 763 B.C., there was total solar eclipse followed by floods and famine.¹ These kinds of events would have raised concerns among the Assyrian Ninevites that the gods were unhappy with them (much like the sailors believed in chapter 1). Regardless, the only way to explain the Ninevites response to God's word is an act of God Himself extending mercy to hardened hearts.

Big Truth: We must never underestimate the impact of God's word on those who have ears to hear. This begs the question, do we have ears to hear the weightiness of God's word?

[vs. 6-9] It's a little difficult to discern the exact chronology in the Hebrew text here, but it appears as though Jonah's preaching created a stir among the people that may have reached the king ahead of Jonah. What's striking here, though, is the king's response. He humbles himself by taking off his royal robes, putting on sackcloth, and sitting in ashes. This was a response of humility and grief in response to great distress.

Then the king ordered a city-wide fast that was radical both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, the fast was to include not only every person, but even every animal—that's extreme. Qualitatively, they were fasting not only from food but also from water. Why fasting? Fasting is a means of expressing deep humility and dependence on God's mercy. It demonstrates the earnestness of one's prayers—that we need God's mercy more than our bodies need food or water. The Ninevites grasped that the warning of God's judgment was real and imminent. And the only possible way of escape would be to appeal the Yahweh's mercy.

In addition to their fasting there were instructed in vs. 8 to "call out mightily to God." But most importantly, each person was to turn from their evil way and from the violence of their own hands. This is a call to unqualified, absolute repentance. ***Repentance is forsaking the sin that offends the holiness of God.***

Why do we not have the same kind of response to our sin today? We who have a fuller knowledge of God's greatness and holiness than the Ninevites had, often have a duller sense of the seriousness of our sin and its consequences. Why? Perhaps it is because we are calloused to the holiness of God. Perhaps it is because we take God's mercy for granted. Whatever it is, we need to pray for God to give us a spiritual sensitivity to His holiness and our sin that leads us to true repentance. One of the ways you can see your own need for revival is if there are sins you confess repeatedly because

¹Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, pg. 770.

you fail to forsake them with lasting repentance. Or perhaps there are sins that you don't even confess because your conscience is seared and your heart is calloused.

Should our repentance be any less earnest than the Ninevites'? Perhaps the best response we could have to Jonah 3 is to pray, "**Lord, make me desperate to rid my life of sin. I can't afford to grieve Your Spirit in my life. Show me my sin, reveal what it truly is in the light of Your holiness. Help me trust in Your mercy with full abandon!**" We are so prone to be independent. We are so prone to doing things our own way. We are so prone to pleasing ourselves. We need to humble ourselves before God and ask Him to show us the true condition of our hearts.

God's mercy in salvation becomes a reality in our lives when, like the Ninevites, we grasp the weight of God's holiness and His judgment against our sin and recognize that the only possible means of rescue is to throw ourselves on the mercy of Christ. Until we find ourselves ready to abandon all for Jesus, Christianity will only be a hobby.

Notice in vs. 9, that the only possible hope for Ninevah was to throw themselves on the mercy of God. **[vs. 9]**

Well, there's only one verse left in chapter 3. And everything hangs on vs. 10. What will God's response be to undeserving sinners who cry out to a holy God for mercy to spare them from the just judgment their sins deserve?

[vs. 10] There's a big, big truth here in vs. 10.

Big Truth: God relents of His judgment when we repent of our sin. Or to say it another way, ***There is no sin from which we turn in repentance, for which God will not turn His judgment from us.***

This raises an interesting question. Were the Ninevites saved because of their repentance or because of God's mercy? There's a sense in which God's

mercy is conditioned upon their repentance. Yet, it was also God's mercy in sending Jonah to preach that led them to repentance.

This is one of those places where we find a healthy tension in Scripture between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. God would not relent of His judgment if they did not repent of their sin. Yet, they would not repent of their sin apart from the merciful work of God in sending His word to have a powerful impact on their hearts. In other words, we have a real responsibility to repent, yet when we repent, we recognize that even our repentance is a response to God's work of grace in us. What a reminder that...

Big truth: Our salvation does not begin with us—all glory belongs to God!

Yet some have struggled with vs. 10. The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches that God is unchanging. Yet doesn't God change His mind and not carry out the judgment He promised in vs. 4? Keep in mind that a warning of judgment is meant to bring about a change in the situation—repentance. When people who are facing divine judgment repent, God is free to respond differently to a changed situation.²

God Himself confirms this in Jeremiah 18:7-10 when He says, "*If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster that I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it*" (NIV).

Where God remains unchanging is in His disposition toward sin and His disposition toward repentance. Richard Philips explains it this way: "*It is precisely because God is unchanging that we are encouraged to repent. God is unfailing in both His wrath against sin and his mercy toward faithful repentance.*"³ If Ninevah had not repented, God would have been faithful to overthrow their city in 40 days. But because Ninevah repented, God was

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (1994), pg. 164-165.

³ Richard Philips, *Jonah and Micah* (Reformed Expository Commentary), pg. 111.

faithful to His own purpose of mercy in sending His word to invoke repentance in the hearts of undeserving people.

And by the way, God used an imperfect servant who was still struggling with His own repentance to extend His mercy to Ninevah. There's a word of encouragement through Jonah that we need as we seek to serve God amid our own flaws, weaknesses, failures, and sins. While we should never take our sin lightly, we also need to be encouraged that...**God is able to accomplish His purposes and make a name for Himself among neighborhoods and nations, even on the shoulders of His peoples' shortcomings.**

Let's not miss the forest for the trees. God's boundless compassion is expressed in mercy to all who repent of their sin. Even those we least expect—like the Ninevites—as shocking as it may be. Yet the message is even more pressing and personal. If Ninevah repented, how much more ought we to repent, who know the benefits of a covenant relationship with the Lord? God, in His mercy, has given us His word to turn us from our sin and toward His boundless compassion and mercy. And that we must never take for granted!