

PP Jonah: God's Relentless Grace-Part 11

Jonah 3:4-6

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I can't recall what scripture it was, or even a single point I made in the first sermon I preached. It was 1993, and I was so nervous I hunched over behind the pulpit and never looked up. Although I can't remember what I taught during that sermon, I remember my first illustration. It was about a preacher who was afraid his sermons were like a Texas steer: a point here and a point there, and a whole lot of bull between. As you know if you've been here for long, I don't preach short sermons, they average 40 minutes. I've been asked even argued with to reduce the length of these sermons. I think it's helpful to tell you that the longest sermon on record was preached by Zach Zehnder from a Florida church who preached for 53 hours and 18 minutes. Long sermons, short sermons, everyone has a preference when it comes to preaching. Some like a sermon with a lot of stories, some with jokes and anecdotes, and some like strong, forceful sermons and some like sermons that teach. Whatever your preference, what makes a sermon powerful is that it centralizes on God's Word. And Jonah, our prophet, with all of his faults, knew this...so he preached God's Word!

If you missed the first 10 sermons in this series, I'd encourage you to get online to hear them. Jonah was a prophet whom God sent to a foreign city called Nineveh, to preach against them. Nineveh was the largest city on earth at that time. It was an **'exceedingly great city'**, so big it reportedly took 3 days to walk through or around it. There was metro-Nineveh, the perimeter, which experts believed was 60 miles in circumference. This area contained farmlands and factories that sustained the people of Nineveh. The city proper was 8 miles around, the palace at its center was 100 acres in size. The walls were 100 feet high, wide enough for 3 chariots to ride side by side, with 1200 towers each of which were 200 feet tall. Into this city walked Jonah, with nothing but God's Word which He began to preach. Can you imagine the courage required for Jonah to do this?

PP *"The will of God will not take us where the grace of God cannot sustain us."* Billy Graham

"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." **Jonah 3:4-5**

PP 1-The Sermon

Martin Luther's advice to young preachers was this: *"Stand up, speak out, and sit down."* That sounds like a short sermon until you learn that Luther's sermons averaged an hour plus. Yet here is Jonah, who goes into Nineveh a day's journey, and begins to preach a little sermon that went like this: ***"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*** It is likely that Jonah had a lot more to say than this, but this is the essence of the message. It sounds like news of certain doom doesn't it, a sermon surely unpopular in our day today.

But let me offer two ways to see the grace in this sermon:

PP The first being the ***'forty days'*** period before judgment

It recalls the times I have had with my children where I have warned them to do something or stop doing something, and given them a chance to correct their behavior before discipline
 A good parent doesn't want to have to discipline their child, yet will if the child will not change
 God doesn't have to wait for forty days, yet even in that period before action, there is an obvious purpose of allowing the people to repent
 It is a divine threat, a God-warning, which means, it is a gracious opportunity to repent

PP The second hint of grace is in the word '*overthrown*', the same word for what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah

PP "*Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. And he overthrew those cities*" **Genesis 19:24-25**

PP But '*overthrown*' is a word that has two different meanings in the Hebrew language
 It also can mean a reversal, a turning up-side down or about face, even a change of heart

PP "*But the LORD your God...turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loved you.*" **Deuteronomy 23:5**

In this brief but brilliant sermon, Jonah presents to the Assyrians that there is hope if they change
 Imagine you hear from your doctor that you have cancer--some here do not have to imagine
 This bad news gets worse as the MRI and toxicology reports prove that it is an aggressive form of cancer that if untreated will eventually end in your death
 But then the doctor gives you the good news, that it is treatable, that there is a 100% cure rate
 The good news is so good in light of the bad news being so bad
 The doctor had the joy of sharing it with you, not only for your relief but your loved ones as well

Jonah's sermon, which God gave him to preach, contains both bad and news
 Depending on their response, God will either destroy them for wickedness, or redeem them
 When God warns, it is not ultimately to scare, but to bring about their repentance

PP "*If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.*" **Jeremiah 18:7-8**

There will come for many of us times where God will give us warnings
 It may be a near death experience that turns us back to God or the near discovery of your sin
 It could be a sudden health issue or a car accident that lands us in the hospital
 It may be on a national scale, like the collapsing of the world trade towers, or the 2008 recession
 His warnings are His grace, for He wants us to turn from that which is wrong and toward right
 They function like flashing lights on a sharp curve, or a custodian's slippery when wet floor sign
 Stop, turn around or you will suffer harm

I want to underscore this point for a moment so we can completely understand what God's message through Jonah really was

'*Yet forty days*' is the flashing danger sign, an opportunity to stop, and turn around
 '*overthrown*' is a message of what will happen if you don't, and what can happen if you do
 If you don't, you will be overthrown, and if you do, you will be forgiven and saved
 This is a warning of destruction and a call to repentance and hope

What Jonah preached was the same message that Jesus preached: "*From that time Jesus began*

PP *to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* **Matthew 4:17**

PP *“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord”* Acts 3:19-20

God delights in saving people, and preaching must be the gracious call that warns of God’s judgement yet extends hope if there is repentance

PP 2-The Response

The main point of this book is that *God is relentlessly gracious and freely offers His salvation, yet His people Israel had held onto their salvation as if it belonged to them alone*
 God’s people would be forced to see that the gift of faith was not their exclusive gift; that God longs and desires to save peoples from all over the world

PP I love what John Ortberg said, *“Redeeming is what God is into. He is the finder of directionally-challenged sheep, the searcher of missing coins, the embracer of foolish prodigal sons. His favorite department is ‘Lost and Found.’”*

And how God saves is never through being a member of a church, or completing confirmation classes, giving to the needy or being a good and kind person

Taking Communion doesn’t save, or any other church-sanctioned sacrament, and certainly not trying to keep all the 10 commandments

A person can only be saved by believing and trusting in what Jesus Christ has done for him/her

PP *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”* Romans 10:17

And this is exactly what we see in Nineveh

“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.” Jonah 3:5

God’s Word, when preached, explained, or shared unleashes the power to believe, and it is when a person believes God that they will be saved

PP *“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”* Hebrews 11:6

But what does it mean to believe or to have faith?

We all exercise faith every day, whether we realize it or not

You eat or drink trusting it is not contaminated, you drive across a bridge trusting it to support you, and you deposit your paycheck trusting the bank will keep it safe

Did you drive or walk here suspecting every motorist was about to veer into you?

Likely no one here sat in the pew wondering if it was about to break causing you injury

Faith is a constant, every day action, and it forms the understanding of what Nineveh did

PP *‘believed’* is a verb that means to be firm in what you believe is true, it was a word used when a nail found something secure to be driven into

Let me give you a way to understand what belief or faith means

Let’s say you buy a new iPad from Amazon, and you get a confirmation email of your purchase

The next day, you get an email from Amazon that your order has shipped, and it includes a tracking label from the shipper

You click on that label, check that you want to be texted with notifications of shipping progress

Couple days later you get an automatic text saying your iPad is out for delivery, and that afternoon, another text saying it had been delivered

Within an hour, someone from home texts you to say your iPad had arrived

You are driving home that afternoon and you decide to stop at Best Buy to get a case for your new iPad that you have never seen, but was told was at home waiting for you
Your faith is based on a certainty that the texts were true, as was the one from wife or husband that you love...you truly and firmly believe your iPad is there, though you've not seen it

The Word of God that Jonah preached was the email, the text from God that they needed as evidence to know that what he said was true
They trusted God, they placed their very lives in His mercy
They firmly believed that in 40 days, if they did not change their ways, God would destroy them
And it created in them a godly sorrow that led to repentance

They called for a fast, which for some of us is not something we normally do
Breakfast is a word that means to break your fast, having gone without food for the night
But a fast is when one deliberately abstains from food, or modifies what they eat, and in the bible it was usually for the purpose of urgently seeking God in distressing circumstances

Sackcloth was a coarse, rough material made from dark goat hair
As its name makes clear, it was usually made into sacks to carry merchandise, but in cases of mourning it was made into clothing, usually the form of a kilt, and worn next to the skin
Both fasting and sackcloth were uncomfortable

Andy, when he was around 3, broke something that he was not supposed to even be touching
As soon as it happened, he came to me crying, his hand spanking his bottom, saying *'I already spanked me, you don't need to.'*
Is that what fasting and sackcloth is...self-inflicted punishment to prevent God's discipline?
The answer is no, for both fasting and sackcloth were reactions of trusting belief, and outward expressions of a broken heart
They are evidences that their faith created an understanding of the seriousness of their sin, and their hearts were broken before God

What do you do when God begins to convict with His Word?
It was 1994, when two kids from my youth group who were dating, became sexually involved
Scripture warns to not awaken love until it's time, meaning the gift of sexual intimacy is only to be opened in marriage, never before...do not Netflix and chill if you know what I mean
To not heed that, is to defy God's commands, and this is sin
Two days later, each had agreed to meet with me
I could have reminded them that the girl's father suffered from PTSD as a result of what he did as a military sniper in Vietnam, so the boy's life might be in danger
I could have warned them about diseases, or the risk of pregnancy or the benefits of abstinence
But at best, those reasons fold in the storm of desire
Instead, I listed 13-14 scripture verses that taught God's view of purity and waiting for marriage and split them into three groups, and I asked if we could each take a turn and read a few of them out loud
I made no commentary on them, I gave no explanation, we simply read the Word of God
And as we took turns reading the bible, the teenage girl began to cry, and at the very same time, the teenage boy began to visibly get angry

The Scriptures began to convict them both showing them they had sinned against God and each other, and she began to feel remorse, while he became furious at me
 The following Sunday at church, she went up to the altar, knelt and began to cry after the sermon
 I went to her, and assured her of God's forgiveness as she had confessed this to God, but she knew she needed to tell her parents and asked if I would help her
 We immediately went to my office, her parents with us, and she told them what she had done
 Her mother cried, her father became angry, but he eventually calmed down and they walked through it together as a family
 The boy broke up with her and never came to church again, his life spiraled downhill

PP ***"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*** Hebrews 4:12-13

Let me close by asking you if have believed in Jesus Christ?
 Have you trusted in the evidence of Scripture that Jesus died so that you could be forgiven of your sins and have eternal life?
 This is faith, this is belief, this is the aim of the Word of God

Amen

Pray