

Sermon:Jonah - The Reborn Prophet

Jonah 3

Preached at 8.15, C@10 and C@6 on 11th September 2016

Intro

Fifteen years ago today, the terrible events of the terror attack on the United States came without warning.

All of us who were old enough remember the horror of the sights we saw constantly filling the television screens and newspapers.

What could have been done to prevent these attacks?

The tightening of security and public awareness campaigns have become commonplace throughout the world.

But whatever measures we put in place, there will still be opportunity for terrorists to strike — as we saw in Nice, France only last month.

Because the nature of terrorist attacks means that there is no warning.

There's no opportunity to avoid the destruction.

In Jonah 3 the threat destruction hangs over the great city of Nineveh.

But it's not the threat of an evil death cult.

It's the threat of judgment from a compassionate and gracious God.

And how different is the outcome.

The Reborn Prophet?

The Jonah at the beginning of chapter 3 looks like a new man!

When the word of God comes to him again, this time he obeys and goes instantly and full of courage to preach the message God has given him, which is summed up in v4 as:

"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

To understand Jonah's newfound bravery we need to just briefly revisit his prayer in chapter 2.

The prayer from v2 onwards isn't the prayer he prayed inside the fish.

It's recounts the whole experience from when he was thrown into the water to after being thrown up on the land... so he's praying as he reflects on his brush with death and with God's action in saving him.

It's a very pious sounding prayer.

But we need to note two things about it that help us understand where Jonah's head and heart are as chapter 3 begins.

Firstly, there's not a hint of repentance in his prayer.

He's not sorry that he did what he did when he ran away from God's call.

In fact, he perhaps feels vindicated in his actions by the fact that God has rescued him!

Friends, even though God often works through our sinful actions to bring about his good purposes, he never condones them.

The light of God's salvation should drive us always to repent of sin, and never to glory in it because good has come out of what we've done.

God's saving act should have driven Jonah to repent of his disobedience, and there's no evidence that it did.

Secondly, he presumes his future with God is secure because he's an Israelite... and God will always save the Israelites, right?

But I'll say more about Jonah next week.

For now it's helpful for us to see that Jonah's newfound obedience seems to have less to do with being sorry for his former disobedience, and more to do with a false arrogance that God is in some sense on his side.

The Compassionate God

Nineveh was a key city in the empire of the brutal Assyrians.

So their response to Jonah's message looks as unlikely as a playground full of schools bullies being reduced to tears by a third grader threatening to bring his big brother to beat them all up!

But there are historical reasons, including political instability in the empire, famines, revolts and plagues, accompanied by a solar eclipse that was usually accompanied by warnings about things like the imminent overthrow of the king — that would have made both the king and the population tuned in to the message from a visiting prophet.

So the

Jonah's preaching seems rather brief:

"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." (or overthrown).

It's a clear message of judgment.

But the forty days gave the Ninevites good reason to understand that the judgment might be delayed or even avoided — as we see from the king's response in v9:

"Who knows? *God may relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."*

And so they respond.

They believe God (v4).

They believe that Israel's God — Jonah's God — had the right and the power to destroy them and their city for the way they were living.

So in v5 they declare a fast for the entire population, and put on sackcloth.

Sackcloth was pretty much what you might imagine wearing a hessian bag might be like — rather prickly.

The fast and the sackcloth were signs of genuine sorrow — not just at the prospect of being wiped out, but sorrow for having done wrong.

The king leaves his throne and affirms the fast and the sackcloth.

He decrees in v8 that everyone should urgently call on God and give up their evil ways and their violence.

And in v10, when God sees their repentance, he has compassion on them and relents from bringing the threatened destruction.

Some people have questioned how the God who never changes can change his mind about what he had threatened to do to the Ninevites.

Friends, God's word is never just an announcement of what's going to happen anyway.

His warning is always designed to bring about repentance in its hearers.

So this whole story should have taught the Israelites about their failure to respond to the warnings that the prophets had been speaking to them.

And God doesn't change in this — that he always has compassion on everyone who hears him and turns from their sin... as he does here.

The people of Nineveh, for now, are spared.

Though we know that Nineveh was later destroyed in 612BC in fulfilment of the prophecy of Habakuk and others.

Their repentance at the preaching of Jonah was genuine, but it wasn't ongoing.

Repentance under Compassion

Well, what do we take away from this incredible episode.

Maybe we can use the letters of God — G O D — to help us remember.

G

God - his nature.

God by his nature is gracious and compassionate.

He warns disobedient people that they are facing his imminent judgment unless they repent of their behaviour in response to his word.

There is no reason why God shouldn't enact his judgment without any warning at all and still be absolutely just and right in doing so.

But he has compassion on everyone who deserves his judgment, and instead treats us graciously, instead of how he is perfectly entitled to treat us.

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 NIV)

“He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9 NIV)

In the gospel, God in his compassion has graciously warned us of the judgment we face unless we hear his word calling us to repentance and faith.

He doesn't want any of us to face his judgment.

He wants every human soul to turn away from living lives that are displeasing to him.

He wants people to live lives that reflect his nature — the nature he's shown us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

O

Ongoing repentance of those who have been spared.

Repentance in the light of God's warning is not a one-off event to get us off the hook of God's judgment.

Repentance is a way of life for those who have been spared God's judgment.

Ongoing repentance is the key to living the life that God has given us a second chance to live.

Your life is full of attitudes and behaviours that still fall short of the way God calls you to live.

Remember he says in Philippians 2:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5 NIV)

None of us are there yet.

But that's not an excuse to stay as we are.

To stay as we are and refuse to change is obstinate disobedience.

It's refusing to repent.

It's refusing to cooperate with God's grace to become more and more like Jesus — which is what he's saved us for.

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ,” (Titus 2:11–13 NIV)

See, God's grace to us is to speak.

His final and fullest word to us is the gospel — the good news of Jesus that the whole Bible revolves around.

God's gracious word is the way he shows us where we need to repent.

So if we're not listening to that word — if we're not spending good regular time reading the Bible during the week, it won't be surprising that we're not changing and growing.

Discovering the attitudes and behaviours that we need to repent won't happen by osmosis.

Someone said to John, Stu and I at a conference a few weeks ago that we shouldn't just tell people what they should do but show you how.

Here's how I listen to God.

I use a plan that I found on the internet that gives me five readings a week. This one gets me through the Bible in a year, but you don't have to do that. But I recommend planning to read through the whole Bible over some time frame — whether it's two or three years.

I bought the new NIV Study Bible that has lots of great helps with notes on verses, summaries of the books, lots of pictures and tables and things.

I've been using this since I was a new Christian — The New Bible Commentary. It will help you understand the Bible as you read it.

I bought the Bible on mp3 CDs. When I drove to and from a meeting over the north side last week I listened to 16 chapters of John's Gospel read beautifully by Poirot! (David Suchet).

Let's reset our thinking about reading the Bible this week.

Instead of a chore that we'd rather be doing anything else instead of, stop and think how gracious God is to speak to us... how compassionate he is to warn us about the attitudes and behaviours that make us deserving of his anger... and to give us the grace to change!

Reflect on how good it is to be changed into the likeness of Jesus, and how kind God is to show us where we need to change to be more like him.

Open your Bible and listen to God speak to you — praying that he'll help you listen and break through your resistance to change.

Ongoing repentance in the light of God's word.

D

Finally, do what God does.

Let's just focus on what we see God do here in Jonah 3.

God shows an attitude of compassion to the Ninevites.

He wants them to change and he gives them the opportunity to repent.

After warning them with his gracious word, and they repent, God relents from treating them as they deserve.

Is that how you operate with others? Because that's how God operates with you every day.

Sometimes we don't even have that attitude of compassion for the people closest to us — let alone the people who even slightly offend us or get on our nerves.

Do you set up standards in your mind that you expect your spouse or children or friends to live up to? And then get angry with them because they aren't everything you want them to be?

Think about people at church.

Is your attitude towards others at church fuelled by an attitude of compassion and marked by words and actions of grace?

Or is it a judgmental attitude, marked by harsh words and your personal expectations of what you think they should be like.

Because God knows what you should be like — and you're not there yet. And he's giving you the time and the grace to change.

If we're not showing others the compassion and grace God is showing us every day, then that's sin that we need to repent of.

Jesus warns about that kind of attitude in the parable of the unmerciful servant.

After being treated with compassion and grace by his master, he treated his fellow servants with contempt, attracting the anger of his and their gracious master.

Compassion and grace will be a challenge for us because we're sinful.

But it's no excuse to say 'that's just the way I am'. It's not the way you should be.

Repent! And keep repenting.

Listen to God. Listen to the word of the gospel and see how gracious God has been to you — and how gracious he continues to be every time we fail.

And with his help, do what God does.

Let his word change you, so that we'll treat each other — and everyone else — with the same compassion and grace that God has shown us in Jesus.