

## Jonah 3

*It will help us to hear Jonah to know that the Assyrians were the worst enemies of the people of God. And Nineveh was a key city in Assyria. The Assyrian invasions of the eighth century B.C were the most traumatic political events in the entire history of Israel.*

*The brutal Assyrian style of warfare relied on massive armies, superbly equipped with the world's first great siege machines manipulated by an efficient corps of engineers.*

*Psychological terror, however, was Assyria's most effective weapon. It was ruthlessly applied, with corpses impaled on stakes, severed heads stacked in heaps and captives skinned alive.*

*The shock of bloody military sieges on both Israel and Judah was profound.*

*"As for Hezekiah the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke. I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered them by means of well-stamped earth ramps and battering rams brought near to the walls combined with the attack by foot soldiers, using mines, breaches as well as sapper work. I drove out 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered them booty. Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage.*

Sennacherib the Assyrian 701 B.C  
(Source-NIV Study Bible page 544-545)

Now let's listen to Jonah again. The message focuses on chapter 3.

What strikes you about chapter 3?

There are three things that blow me away.

First: **A crazy contrast.**

The story starts, back in chapter one, with this phrase: 'The word of the Lord came....'. The word of the Lord came to Jonah. 'The word of the Lord came' is a key phrase in the Bible. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah a **second** time. Mhmmm. Jonah **rose** according to the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Finally. Only after his three days of suffering.

The details about Nineveh are only there to support the contrast. Nineveh was a city great unto God. It would take three days to get across it. At the beginning of day one, Jonah starts into the city. It's morning in Nineveh. The city is loud with ox cart wheels squealing, slave owners shouting, slaves groaning, the clang and smoke as weapons are forged. Hard work before the heat of the day. *[Let's try this, all of you over to my left, make the noise of squealing ox carts. You in the centre section, groan like slaves, you on my right 'clang' like blacksmiths]*

Jonah proclaims the word of the Lord. **"In forty days it's all over!"**

And everything stops! "What did you say?!"

The people believed in God. The Bible uses the same phrase for Abraham in Genesis 15:6, Paul repeats it in Romans 4.

They believed in God and they stopped in their tracks. They declared a fast for all people and for their fat Assyrian animals.

When **the word** reached the king, he **rose** from his throne, took off his symbols of power, covered himself in sackcloth and sat down in the dust. The king is gripped by his abusive sins of power and the sins of his people. God has had enough. They have to change.

People who have lived with God for a long time run the danger of taking God for granted. All the rough edges of our faith can be sanded down over time. We might think this is the way life is, and this is how it will always be. The king and the people of Nineveh take the Lord at his word and they act on it

right away. Like any fresh believer, their conviction challenges us all to take a good hard look at our own obedience.

That's how Jesus uses this story, by the way. Listen to Matthew 12:38-41

<sup>38</sup>Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

<sup>39</sup>He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup>For 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. <sup>41</sup>The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one <sup>[a]</sup> greater than Jonah is here.

All of us have to look at our own lives. Where there is sin we stop that behaviour and throw ourselves on the mercy of God.

2. In the story the word of the Lord is **powerful and effective**. It is like a two-edged sword. Jonah finally speaks truth to power in the name of the Lord. The God of the heavens and the earth and Nineveh stops in her tracks.

One day every tyrant and every dictator and oppressor, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is the Lord over all.

Don't ever be shy or intimidated about speaking the word of the Lord. Don't be reckless either, but wherever and to whomever we speak a word from the Lord, we can trust that his Spirit is at work and that he will get done what he needs to accomplish.

Remember Jonah, and the people of Nineveh when you speak a word for the Lord.

Now did you notice that the word of the Lord echoes back again out of the mouth of the king of Nineveh?

“Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows, God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

This is the second gospel call and I think it is in the story so that the people of Israel, the ‘church people’ will hear it. I know I just said that every time we speak a word of the Lord we can trust that it comes in the power of the Spirit and it will be effective.

And it is also true that you can come to church Sunday after Sunday and I or some other pastor will say, “We have to cry out to God, Or, “we can’t keep living like this”. And it is as if we were saying, “kwak, kwek, kweak”. You just don’t hear it.

And then the last person you ever expect, your worst enemy says, “we have to cry out to God, we have to stop our greedy ways, we have to stop our violent ways, we have to stop raping the planet, we have to care for the poor, we have to respect all people.....maybe God will have compassion on us!”

And finally, you too stop. And turn, and call out to the Lord for mercy.

Which brings us to point three.

“Who knows?!” Maybe, just maybe God will have mercy.

The Sunday School answer and the catechism answer, the answer of the Bible most of all, is, “of course God will have mercy!”

All through the Bible we are told that God nothing makes God happier than to show mercy. (Micah 7:18, Luke 15)

Peter says that God is not willing that anyone should perish but that all people would turn around and receive mercy. (2 Peter 3:9)

And yet, and yet, it is so hard for me to trust that God has mercy for **me**. It is so hard for us to see that God has mercy for our enemies. I don't think that I have many enemies. But on Thursday afternoon, I finished this sermon, then went out for tea with a pastor I don't know that well. He immediately brought up the name of the one person who has hurt me more than anyone else in my life. I did not want to think about him. It felt like God was reminding me that his compassion is also for our own Ninevites, our own worst enemies.

So here is the last point. I say to you, God is gracious and compassionate. He has mercy for all of our sins and for those who have sinned against us. It is safe and dangerous at the same time to come to him, to turn around and to follow Jesus.

The Lord be gracious to you. The Lord be gracious to me.

The Lord be gracious to those we love. The Lord be gracious to our enemies.

And all God's people said, Amen.