

Sermon 5: Jonah 3:1-10: God's grace in Nineveh

OUTLINE

Re-commissioned
Revival
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Relenting

INTRODUCTION

Jonah 3 is usually known as the chapter where Jonah was obedient, but in truth this chapter is not about Jonah but about God. God and His grace, not man and his obedience are the centre of the chapter and the heart of the Gospel. Jonah is often employed as a sword to induce guilt over our disobedience and lack of faithfulness to missions, and this certainly is one of the applications. However, the primary use of this chapter is, in my opinion, to portray the God of grace to sinners. And having seen this grace afresh we will find that this sight of God's grace will be a better incentive to obedience than the stinging sight of our own sin. God's grace is evident in 4 ways: to Jonah when God puts him back in His employ; in the revival in Nineveh; in the genuine repentance in Nineveh; and in His relenting of judgement upon Nineveh.

Re-commissioned

What would you do with a soldier who when the enemy approached fled the field of battle? Normally we would want him disciplined and dishonourably discharged. Here we see God's grace towards His sinning servant Jonah. Jonah is rebuked, disciplined, and humiliated by his having to be thrown into the sea and rescued by a fish. However, God does not discharge him from service but continues to employ him in His service. We see Jonah being re-commissioned in 3:1-2, "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." Jonah is not necessarily a model for every leader or officer in the church that sins. There are sins that do disqualify a man from public office, though not from eternal salvation. However, we must not miss the significance of God reemploying Jonah as an indication of His grace towards His feeble and sinning servants. Which of us can say that we have been perfect servants that have always discharged our duties faithfully; how many of us have never failed in duty just like Jonah? We are all sinners in God's service, but in our failings God does not cast us off. He may discipline us, there may be a very painful experience, but the call to serve is issued to sinners over and over again. Have you known this grace? Have you ever sinned and felt like God is definitely going to cast you off? And then you see His forgiveness, His love, His delight in you because of His Son, and His call to restore you to service. He is a Father who restores His failing children. If you feel your sins deeply and know what they deserve this truth will be a wonderful consolation.

Revival

The account of the success of Jonah's ministry should probably win a prize for being the briefest account of a revival in history. We have an account of the preaching conditions in v3-4 where we are told that Jonah would have to cover an area of three days walking to cover the outer lying areas of the city of Nineveh. And in v5 we have a terse summary of the effect of Jonah's preaching, '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.' Several things are astonishing about this revival. Firstly, the message that was preached, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' A message of doom and gloom, and a message with a date attached to it. If we saw a total stranger wash up on the beach smelling like fish and heard a message like this we would get him committed, never mind repenting. God blessed this difficult truth to bring about revival. The message was probably more than a mere doom and gloom message, we get a sense that Jonah must have made mention of God, as 3:5 reveals that the Ninevites believed God. Secondly, remember Jonah is the messenger. He is a sinner, a failure, a runaway. However, God's grace blesses the message of truth on the lips of those who have blown it. Thirdly, notice that the revival was not local but pervasive throughout the city. Fourthly, God started with the king. As we read v6-9 we are reading an explanation of which v5 is a summary. The revival started with the message coming to the attention of the king and his proclamation of fasting and repentance going out. God caused the message to take root in the influential and spread it from there. We need to emphasize that the book of Jonah can be presented in this way, 'See what God does when His servants are obedient!' This is not what the book is about, the issue is God's grace not man earning the blessing by his faithfulness. This revival would not have been the result of Jonah's obedience even if Jonah had obeyed the first time. The results of God causing people to be saved are always by grace. This is our confidence as we go into a world that is just like Nineveh.

Some have suggested that God in his providence prepared the ground for Nineveh's revival. Nineveh was at a low point. They were afflicted with civil war, they were experiencing famine, their vassals were rebelling, and they had even had a solar eclipse. The Lord often prepares the ground for the seed of His word by breaking up the hard ground. The Lord works in our lives in the same way using difficulty as a preparation to make our hearts more receptive.

Repentance

The next aspect of God's grace we need to view is the genuine repentance that He enabled. We know from the NT that repentance is a gift of God wrought in us by His Spirit, whereby we are made to feel our sin and turn from it in a heartfelt manner (Acts 11:18, 2 Tim 2:25). As we look at the king and the city of Nineveh responding to the preaching of Jonah we can see a genuine work of repentance. "The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, 8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." (v6-9). Although we see some strange and unnecessary elements like putting sackcloth even on the animals and not allowing the animals to drink or eat, the intent seems sincere though misinformed.

3 elements of repentance are put forward¹. Firstly, all true repentance includes a sorrow for sin, we see the sorrow of the Ninevites in the adoption of the cultural signs of sorrow in their use of sackcloth and fasting v6. Thomas Watson² gives us 6 traits of true sorrow

1 See Rick Phillips, Jonah and Micah, Reformed Expository Commentary

2 Doctrine of repentance.

which forms part of repentance. Firstly, it is a sorrow of the heart not only outwardly, 'As the heart bears the primary part in sinning so it must bear a primary part in sorrowing.' Secondly, Godly sorrow is sincere, it not only sorrows over the consequences of sin but over the sinfulness of the sin itself. Thirdly, godly sorrow mourns with faith, in other words it is not so taken up with its sin and blind to a God of grace that it is drowned in despair. It feels deeply but it also believes deeply. Fourthly, true sorrow is a deep sorrow, 'sorrow for sin should be so great as to swallow up all other sorrow.' Fifthly, godly sorrow is willing to give restitution. When our sins affect others, we are willing to pay what is owed, it can be an apology or compensation for losses. Sixthly, godly sorrow is abiding and ongoing, it is not over with a few tears.

Secondly, true repentance involves turning from sin, v8, 'Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hand.' Once again Watson maps out 5 aspects of a true turning from sin. Firstly, it is a turning from sin from the heart not only outwardly. Secondly, it is a turning from all sin. Thirdly, it is a turning from sin for the right reasons, love for God not only fear of consequences. Fourthly, we turn from sin but to God. And fifthly, in turning from sin we turn from it permanently.

A third element of true repentance is faith. We see the Ninevites turning in faith to God. 'Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from His fierce anger so that we may not perish.' The very fact of a warning indicates a willingness on God's part to forgive. We may think that warnings and threats are bad and a point of no turning back, but this is not the case with God. Sodom received no warning, but Nineveh did. Sodom was given no chance to repent but Nineveh is. The willingness of a holy God is a necessary part of all repentance. It is in knowing that God forgives and restores that we are emboldened to abandon our sins. To know our own wretchedness and see how God in His love is willing to forgive them though they are so terrible is a great comfort. As Paul puts it in Romans 2:5 God's kindness leads us to repentance. This is part of the power of the cross. In the cross we see God's beloved Son given for us. Heaven's best for earth's worst. This is what is being said in the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, "'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' Look at the love of God and see the promise that no matter who you are or what you have done, if you will come to God, believe upon Christ, you too can have your sins forgiven. God has promised it, He cannot lie, this should draw you with great confidence even though you are a great sinner to God and to leave your sins behind.

Relenting

Jonah 3:10 is a well-used verse in a particular theological debate, the discussion of the immutability of God, does God change His mind? Often it has been traditionally argued by Arminians that He does, and by Calvinists that He does not. Of late we are now seeing something called Process Theology trying to say that God does in fact change, and even grow and become more and more Himself as He is transformed by His interaction with His creation. There are all sorts of attaching questions but this is not the place to enter this discussion in depth. Just a few comments about God relenting/changing and still being immutable/unchanging. Firstly, the bible has no problem making the double assertion that God does not change, and that He is willing to relent if sinners repent. Numbers 23:19, 'God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?' Jer 18:7-8, '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.' Is this a contradiction, should we

assume that God does change? No! Of Course not! It is in fact because God is unchangeable in His holiness that He changes when sinners repent. God hates sin and will judge sin, this He cannot change about Himself, so that when He looks upon a sinner and tells them that He will judge them He is speaking the truth. However, if a sinner repents and seeks forgiveness, then God no longer hates but delights in the sinner and it would be wrong of God, even unjust for Him to punish when the sinner has repented for his sins are forgiven. It is because does not hange in His essential holiness that sin can be forgiven every time a sinner repents. And there is no sin before His holiness that has not been taken care of by the sacrifice of Christ. We must be careful not to press the statements about judgement as absolute, the very fact that God made so much effort to get Jonah to Nineveh reveals His desire to see them repent that He might not judge them, the message of judgement was a means of bringing about that change. Also, we need to allow for weakness in language as it seeks to use anthropathisms and anthropomorphisms to convey God's actions and emotions. Human speech will inevitably misrepresent the infinite God when it is borrowing language that we use to describe our own finite actions.

This wonderful truth of God relenting when sinners repent is a wonderful certainty, not because God does change, but because He does not change. If He did change we would have no confidence ourselves in our own acceptance before God, and we would be like the Muslims who have an arbitrary God who cannot be relied upon.

And so it is that God's grace is demonstrated in Jonah 3.