

The Lord Relents

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you, Lynn. If you can keep your Bibles open in chapter three there, that would be great. We're all very used to companies overselling their products, raising our expectations about what they can deliver. Whether it's the overly perfect photos of a holiday destination, or unrealistic advertised broadband speeds, whatever it is, we've seen it and sometimes we've fallen for it. We've allowed our expectations to be raised beyond what is reasonable.

Tonight's passage, we see exactly the opposite. Rather, we see a prophet's message and a people's expectations that are far below reality. For those of you who like headings, we'll be looking at this under three main points. An incomplete message in verses one to four, an uncertain hope in verses five to nine, and an unbounded grace in verse 10. And for those of you who like pictures, they are brought to you tonight courtesy of my sister. So back in chapter one, verse one, we were introduced to the prophet Jonah as God gave him a commission to go and to preach to the city of Nineveh. Then we've been through a sort of two chapter detour as Jonah decided that, well, actually he had other plans. He wasn't going to Nineveh.

And so here, at the beginning of chapter three, we find that we're back at the beginning again. Once again, God tells Jonah, go to Nineveh. And this time he goes. Jonah's now a humbled and a chastened man. Before he arrogantly thought that he could get out of doing what God told him to do. But now he realizes he has no option. What God says he must do, he must do.

That doesn't mean he's completely on board with it, as we'll see next week. But he goes to Nineveh.

Nineveh was a great city. Not exactly clear what this description about three days journey means. It could be the circumference of the greater city area. There's all sorts of explanations. But whatever, this is one of the largest cities in the world at the time, probably larger than Babylon. It's the capital of the great Assyrian Empire, one of the world powers of its day. It's a city of great art and architecture, much of which is today in the British Museum. But it's also a city of great wickedness.

[3 : 1 2] Even their king acknowledges down in verse eight, their evil ways and violence. And so this is the city that Jonah goes to. And as he goes there, he preaches a simple message.

It's recorded here in verse four, in just eight words, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. It's a stark message. It's a blunt message. It's clear and leaves no room for misunderstanding.

40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. It's a message of judgment and of destruction. Back in chapter one, we read that the wickedness of the city had come before God.

Where we aren't told exactly what their wickedness was, but for whatever reason, God had decided that he was not going to put up with them any longer. And so Jonah preaches the message that their time is up. The city will be overthrown. It's a clear message, yes, but it's an incomplete message.

It's a one-sided message. And Jonah knew that it was. Because he doesn't tell them of the full character of God. He doesn't tell them that he knows that God is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

[4 : 56] We know he knows that. And in chapter two, we saw how he experienced God's compassion firsthand. But Jonah is the Iron Age equivalent of a street preacher walking up and down the street, wearing a sandwich board that says on it, the wages of sin are death, and stops there.

And forgets about the second half of the verse. But the gift of God is eternal life. It's an incomplete message because it only tells part of the story.

We have to make sure that we are communicating a full gospel. There's probably been a tendency over the years to oscillate back and forwards between two extremes.

We need to preach the glory of God's eternal nature. And not really wanting to mention sin in case it offends anyone.

We need to preach the glory of God's eternal nature. We need to preach the perfection of his creation.

[6 : 06] We need to preach the tragedy of the fall. We need to preach the horror of judgment. We need to preach the scandal of the incarnation of God stepping into his own creation as a man.

We need to preach the wonder of the cross. Of Jesus dying for my sin and for yours. We need to preach the triumph of the resurrection.

We need to preach the need for repentance. We need to preach the struggles of the Christian life. But we need to preach the security of our future hope.

We need to make sure that we cover it all. To make sure that we are communicating the truth. And not just the bits of the truth that we want to talk about. If we shy away from some parts because we're uncomfortable.

Then we're not being faithful. We're not being honest. We risk giving people false hope. But we also need to be careful.

[7 : 12] I don't think that means that we need to say everything every time. When we look at the sermons recorded in Acts. Very few of them cover the full gospel.

This morning we thought about Paul and Barnabas in Lystra. Paul's sermon there covers one point. God created the world and shows kindness by providing rain and food.

He doesn't mention the cross. In fact, he doesn't even mention Jesus. He starts where they are. And he says just enough to challenge their view of the world.

And that was enough for some people to reject the message. And for others to want to know more. I remember once going to a dedication service for a colleague's baby.

Because they knew there would be non-Christian friends there. The preacher added a simple gospel summary onto the end of his sermon. It covered the basics.

[8 : 18] We are sinners. God is holy. God sends his son to take the punishment. We can be forgiven. One of my colleagues who was there as an atheist.

As he commented to me afterwards. I'd forgotten how mathematical they make it all sound. And trying to cover everything that had left him cold.

I wonder perhaps if they'd chosen to speak on one part of it. And let the wonder shine through. Would it have caught his attention? Who knows?

But. Whether our message covers one point. Or many. Whether there are key things missing by accident.

Or on purpose. The important thing to remember. Is that it is the spirit that is at work here. Because all the Ninevites hear.

[9 : 20] Is that this Israelite God is threatening judgment. They hear nothing about why they should believe this God. Rather than any of their other gods. They hear nothing about any alternative to judgment.

And yet they believe. God's grace is active. However incomplete the message. And however poor and reluctant the messenger might be.

But just before we move on to the next point. I should go back and look again at that message. That Jonah preached. Because I portrayed it as purely a message of judgment.

And largely it is. But even in those words. Hope shines through. Because firstly God is giving a warning. He didn't need to.

He would have had every right. To destroy the city without warning. But instead he tells them. Exactly what he's going to do. But secondly he gives them time.

[10 : 26] He gives them 40 days. That's such a symbolic period of waiting. And of preparation. Likewise in our time.

God is patiently waiting. When speaking about why Jesus was taking so long to come back. Peter wrote. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise.

As some understand slowness. He is patient with you. Not wanting anyone to perish. But everyone to come to repentance.

God is merciful. And so he gives them time. He gives us time. He gives our friends and family time to repent.

And so. How did the Ninevites respond to this message. When they heard it. And believed it. They responded in quite a dramatic way.

[11 : 30] Because the king leads everyone in humbling himself. He gets down off his throne. He takes off his royal robes. And dresses in sackcloth.

A harsh, rough, black cloth made of goat hair. And he sits in the dust. He commands that everyone in the city. From the greatest to the least.

And all the animals. Do the same. And he commands a total fast. From all food and drink. But also he commands them to stop.

Their evil ways. And violence. They are to stop doing. The wrong that they've been doing. And they are to ritually humiliate themselves.

Before God. Why? Why would they do this? It seems rather strange behaviour. I think the answer comes down in verse 9.

[12 : 31] Who knows? God may yet relent. We don't know what the Ninevites knew. About the God of Israel.

It's quite likely that they'd at least heard some rumours. Because we saw the terrified reaction of the sailors in chapter 1. When they heard who Jonah was fleeing from.

But whatever they previously knew of God. When they heard Jonah's message of coming judgment. They immediately were aware of their guilt before God.

And they decided to throw themselves on his mercy. In the hope that he might relent. But we see how uncertain that hope was. Who knows?

God may yet relent. They didn't know if God would be merciful. But they considered it sensible to stake everything.

[13 : 30] On the chance that he might be. They believed the message of judgment. And they had no other options available. They knew very little of God.

And so they threw themselves on him. In the hope that he might be merciful. We see something rather different in Psalm 51.

Where David asks God to have mercy on him. According to his unfailing love and great mercy. David's plea for mercy is based on what he does know.

On what God has revealed to him about his character. The Ninevites uncertain hope was based on their lack of knowledge of God. David's hope had a much greater certainty.

Because it was based on his knowledge of God. But even David's knowledge of God. And of his mercy. Are limited compared with what has been revealed to us now.

[14 : 32] Because we have Christ. And in him all of God's character has been revealed. And we see him hanging on the cross. We see the lengths that God went to.

So that we might be forgiven. And therefore we can have confidence in his mercy. And we have Paul's epistles. And the other apostles writing.

Teaching us of the theology of God's mercy. Of what it means to have no condemnation. Of what it means to have peace with God. We have more reason than even David.

To hope and trust in God's mercy. But saying that. We mustn't think that we need to know. And understand everything about God.

Before we can turn to him. Increasing our knowledge of God is good. But what we need to do is cast ourselves on his mercy. Based on what we do know now.

[15 : 34] In the words of the old hymn. Just as I am. Without one plea. But that thy blood was shed for me.

And that thou bidst me come to thee. O Lamb of God. I come. We can learn more later. We should seek to learn more later.

But we should not wait until then. There are probably many of us here. Who would say we became Christians as young children. For me I believe it was somewhere around four.

I have no idea what I knew or understood at that age. But there was something that made me believe that I needed Jesus.

And we are called to come to him. Whatever age we are. Like a little child. But then for some of us.

[16 : 35] We may have been following him for many years. But at times. Our hope becomes less certain. Whether it's the cynicism of age.

The challenges of what we've been through. Or the constant knowledge of our sin that never seems to go away. In the words of a song by Andrew Peterson.

It's the fear that I'll fall one too many times. It's the fear that his love is no better than mine. But he tells me that just as I am.

Just as I was. Just as I will be. He loves me. He does. He showed me the day that he shed his own blood. He loves me. Oh he loves me.

He does. And in the words of that father who came to Jesus in Mark's gospel. We can cry out. Lord I believe. Help now my unbelief.

[17 : 37] And so we come to. Our final point. And our final verse. In verse 10. What does God do.

When the people. Having heard an incomplete message. Respond to it with uncertain hope. Like the father. In the parable of the prodigal son.

Who sees his son in the distance. And runs to him. With arms open wide. So God responds to the feeble pleas. Of the Ninevites. By not bringing about the judgment.

And destruction of their city. And next week. We'll see how God expresses. His love. For the people of Nineveh. We have to be careful.

And not draw too many parallels. Between the repentance of a city. And that of an individual. But Jesus will later hold out.

[18 : 35] The repentance of Nineveh. As an example. To the people of his day. Because he says to them. 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 someone greater than Jonah. Is here.

They knew very little. But they turned from their sin. They turned to God. And he relented. In bringing judgment. On the city.

The people of Jesus' day. They knew far more. And he was standing right there. In front of them. And yet they rejected him.

But to those who do turn to him. In repentance. He says. Whoever comes to me. I will never drive away. Because he offers full.

[19 : 32] And complete forgiveness. For our sin. Past. Present. Future. Big sins. Small sins. Public sins.

Secret sins. He offers reconciliation. With God. He offers life. In all its fullness. Forgiveness. He offers adoption.

Into his own family. He offers purpose. And meaning. And hope. Have you come to him.

And accepted. That forgiveness. Or are you still. Ignoring him. As we saw with Nineveh. He's given a warning. And he's given time.

But that time. Will not go on forever. But it's not just Nineveh. We see in this passage. That needs God's grace.

[20 : 28] And that receives God's grace. So does Jonah. Back at the end of chapter 2. We saw God's mercy towards Jonah. As he was saved from drowning.

And vomited up in the dry land. It would have been reasonable. For Jonah's story to stop there. A rather embarrassed. And wet man. Makes his way back to Jerusalem.

And quietly lives out his days in peace. Away from the public eye. That would seem a perfectly reasonable ending. But God doesn't stop there.

Instead he entrusts to Jonah. The very task that he gave him. In the first place. Like so many of the characters. Throughout the Bible. Jonah had failed God.

In our eyes. That would surely be the end of his ministry. But God still had plans for him. How many Christians.

[21 : 28] Are held back from a life of service to God. Because they know that they failed God. And believe they can't be used by him again. Or even how often as churches.

Do we write off those who have failed publicly. As unsuitable for public service. Now I'm not saying we shouldn't be very careful. And discerning.

But Jesus built his church. And foundation of failures. Of people who had run away. Of people who had denied him.

Even of people who had sought to kill his followers. John Piper writes that. The tragedy. The tragedy. Is that Satan uses the guilt of these failures.

To strip you of every radical dream you ever had. Or might have. And in its place. Give you a happy. Safe. Secure. American.

[22 : 26] Or Scottish. Life. Of superficial pleasures. Until you die in your lakeside rocking chair. Wrinkled. And useless. Leaving a big fat inheritance.

To your middle aged children. To confirm them. And their worldliness. That's the main tragedy. How many of us are reluctant to do.

What we believe God is calling us to do. Because of the guilt of past failures. Or are standing on this platform. Feeling completely. Unworthy of communicating this message.

We should not for a moment think we can just ignore our sin. Just sweep it under the carpet. And hope that God doesn't notice. But if we have come to God.

In repentance. And confessed our sin to him. Then we do not need to live with our guilt. And we can go out. And serve him. In whatever way he calls us to.

[23 : 29] It may be. Like Jonah. That he calls you to pick up where you left off. Or it may be. That he has a new task for you. A different one.

And so. As we draw to an end. Have we been underselling God's grace? Have we by our words.

Or our actions. Communicated an incomplete message? Have we suggested to people that they're alright. When they aren't. Or have we implied that they're beyond saving?

Have we been not fully grasping what God's grace means for ourselves? Is our hope uncertain? Is our hope uncertain? And have we failed to realize just what he has done for us?

Have we never turned to him in repentance. Seeking forgiveness? Or are we burdened by failures and regrets? And need to turn to him again and again.

[24 : 36] And let him recommission us for the task ahead. Let's finish with the words of song that we're going to sing later in service.

What love could remember no wrongs we have done? Omniscient, all-knowing, he counts not their sum.

Thrown into a sea without bottom or shore, our sins, they are many. His mercy is more. If you forget anything else that I've said, let's go into the week with that thought filling our hearts.

Wherever we are, wherever we're coming from, whoever we're going to come in contact with this week, whatever situation we'll be in, his mercy is more.