

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. . . . ¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

God’s Word produces real change

1. Jonah changed and preached in Nineveh
2. The people of Nineveh changed their evil ways and believed
3. God changed and did not destroy them

How far would you go to find a fountain of youth? What would you give to forever have the energy level of a two-year old and the smooth skin of a baby’s bottom? In the movie Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade the intrepid Dr. Jones slogged through a sewer, stepped over rats, outran a fire, did battle with the Nazis, and finessed his way through an ancient labyrinth to find a fountain of youth. Forced by a shadowy antiques collector, Indy was in search of the Holy Grail, a name some give to the cup used at Jesus’ Last Supper. The story line was that this cup would give immortality to anyone who drank from it. The Last Crusade is only a movie but it illustrates well how desperate mankind is to find something that will stave off death. (Daniel Habben)

The people of Nineveh didn’t need a holy grail. What they needed was a changed Jonah and God’s Word because God’s Word produces real change.

Nineveh was a large city in Assyria. Nineveh had walls that were 100 feet high and so wide that three chariots could drive abreast on a road built on top of it. The city was so large it took the prophet three days to make the rounds through all the plazas and parks where people could gather.

Assyria was a cruel, aggressive country. It was said that King Ashurnasipal took great delight in the high mounds of human heads he erected after his victories. We are not told the nature of Nineveh’s sin and why just the city and not the whole nation. The fact that God was going to destroy it may hint that the city was as wicked as Sodom and Gomorrah.

And that is where God wanted Jonah to preach.

The story of Jonah is a whale of a tale. Jonah was a prophet in Israel, called by God to preach God’s Word in Nineveh, one time capital of Assyria. Jonah didn’t want to preach in Nineveh so he boarded a ship and headed for Spain, the opposite direction and about as far away as you could get by boat. But God caused a terrible storm to come up on the sea. The ship was about to perish when the sailors cast lots to determine who was the cause of their misfortune. The lot fell to Jonah. Reluctantly, to save the ship and their lives, they threw Jonah overboard and the sea became calm.

God preserved Jonah alive by causing a large fish – not a whale – to swallow him. Then the fish vomited him up on shore.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” The first change we see God’s Word make is in Jonah himself. Escaping death through a great fish Jonah experienced God’s mercy and grace. Motivated by God’s forgiveness Jonah made the long journey to the great city of Nineveh.

And Jonah preached. “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

Jonah’s experience with the fish may have been a powerful sermon for the Ninevites. It illustrated who God is: a just, yet forgiving God. It may even have been that the three days in the fish’s belly changed Jonah’s appearance so that he was a sign the Ninevites could literally see. If the fish’s stomach juices had caused Jonah to lose his hair and discolor him a bit, he would have been a powerful object lesson of God’s judgment and forgiveness.

“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” “Overturned” sounds a little weak to me, like flipping an egg. It’s much more violent than that. This is the same word used of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It signals

total, catastrophic destruction. It's an expression of God's anger against sin. God told them he was bringing total destruction.

But not for forty days.

When you pay your car insurance, you might have a grace period. It may be due on the fifth of the month, but they give you until the fifteenth before they start charging a late fee. That's a grace period. The Ninevites recognized the forty days as a grace period from God. If God wanted to destroy them, he would have done so. The fact that he gave them this warning showed them God's grace. They saw these 40 days as a grace period.

And they made use of it. *The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.* They repented. Repentance is turning around like a person in a burning building turning from the fire to safety. Repentance is turning from our sins as the very fire of hell and turning in faith to our Savior. Repentance is change.

The Ninevites repented, that is, changed and believed God. The Hebrew word for *believe* is the word from which we get, *Amen*. They were saying their *Amen* to God. They were saying their *Amen* to God's Word. In other words, they accepted Jonah's message as a true message of God. They believed that God meant what he said about destruction. But they also saw in this a second chance. Why would God warn them, if he wasn't giving them a second chance? Remember Scrooge? Remember his pleadings with the ghost of Christmas future? He asked if the things he was being shown were a shadow of what will be or what may be. And he asked why they would show him these things if he was beyond hope? He saw in those ghostly visits a second chance. So also the Ninevites believed God's word and God's second chance.

How would you react if God told you that you had forty days left? That is, you have forty days until God destroys you. Forty days – that's March 1st. Would you say, "Well, at least I can enjoy February?" Would you hesitate to forgive that family member? Would you keep up the affair? Fall deeper into self-indulgence? Continue to be harsh with your spouse? Pick on your little sister or fight with your brother? What would you do if God gave you until March 1st? The thing is, you may not have forty days. God could call you home tonight. What would you do with the next forty days? The people of Nineveh repented. They changed. They believed.

God's Word produced real change. If God can do that, what does that tell us? Don't think that God's Word won't make a difference. Don't think for one minute that coming to church and listening to God's Word do your children no good. Don't think for one moment that devotions are useless within your home. Don't think for one second that God's Word couldn't produce a change in you or your family.

In our interest to win people for Christ, we may give the impression that God is laid back about sin. Maybe we like to think of him that way, too. But that is not God. That is an image of God, a TV personality god, but it is not really God. If we are to win people for Christ, we need to let them see the true God. We need to show them the cross. Look at it and see that is how God feels about sin. That is how God feels about every little lie, every time we cheat and all of our coveting and greed. There on the cross we see that God hates sin. He beats it and nails it to a cross.

Because Jonah changed and preached in Nineveh, the Ninevites changed and believed God's Word. So God also changed and did not destroy them. *When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.* Here we see a beautiful picture of the grace of God. He's much more merciful than people picture. Most people believe that God forgives, but only if you are nice. But look at what God does here. These people didn't earn God's forgiveness by groveling. God forgave them freely. He showed them undeserved love, unearned love. That's grace.

That amazing grace forgives you, too. Not because you are a good, church-going person, not because you try to live right, not because you are kind and loving to your children. God forgives you by grace. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

That grace is so amazing, that we will want to follow him. That's what happened in our Gospel lesson. When those first disciples met Jesus, they realized, this is the true God! This is the true Messiah! They followed him because they wanted to learn more about him. They were tired of all the fake versions of God, all the fake versions of the Messiah. They wanted to know the true God, and so they followed Jesus.

And so it is with you. You will want to learn more about his holiness, more about his mercy, more about his forgiveness. And so, like those first disciples, we follow Jesus. We can't walk next to him in person, on a road in the Middle East, like those first disciples. But we can walk next to him in his Word.

We will want to walk with him because God's Word produces real change. God's Word changed Jonah. God's Word changed the Ninevites. God's Word changes you.