



Opposing Motives

Jonah 3

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Good morning, we've been in the book of Jonah, and we've come to chapter 3. For review, Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, where he cried out to the Lord in distress. After his confession, he was vomited out onto the shore. Now, the text doesn't tell us how much time the Lord gave Jonah to gather himself and recover from what was probably the most traumatic event in his life... it may have been immediately afterward or days, or months later. I think that it was pretty immediate, possibly right away, as soon as he hit the sand.

So, the story tells us that Jonah was ejected onto the beach. This was a time well before hotels had popped up and lined the beaches like they do now— there wouldn't have been any posh high-rise suites for Jonah to check into, clean himself up and sip a margarita under a palm tree while watching a glorious sun set on the Mediterranean sea, reflecting on life and death... though I bet the first thing that ran through his mind was “get me a drink!”

Another unknown is where Jonah actually ended up when he finally hit dry land. Again, Scripture doesn't tell us but if I know the way the Lord works, my guess is that he ended up right back where he started when he ran away from God, somewhere around Joppa, which is in modern day Tel-Aviv. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if Jonah stood up and recognized the dock off in the distance where he started his fateful journey.

So, Jonah was most likely somewhere around modern-day Tel-Aviv, and he needed to go to Nineveh. Nineveh is present day Mosul, Iraq and it's around 600 miles Northeast of Tel-Aviv. You might not have realized this, but back in Jonah's time, it took anywhere from several weeks to a few months to get to Nineveh. He probably needed to join a caravan of camels, if anything for safety. He would have encountered life-threatening perils along the way such as extreme weather, wild animals, bandits and thieves, and especially enemies of the Jews since he was heading into enemy territory. The Assyrians were the bitter enemies of the Jews in those days. They were thought of as uncivil barbarians with good reason— they were known for raping, torturing, and killing the Israelites. If you're a Star Trek fan, the Assyrians were the Klingons.

Travel between Israel and Nineveh was rough, in fact, it's doubtful that travel between the two was common in Jonah's day, though the Assyrian empire was expanding and would have encompassed the kingdom of Israel by 722 BC. So, the paths between Israel and Nineveh may not have been well-traveled. To be honest, for a lone Jew to travel that distance to the capital city of their worst enemies would have been a death sentence were it not for the Lord's call and protection. The thought of undertaking such a journey probably weighed heavy on Jonah's first decision to disobey the call.

So, with that bit of background, I invite you to open to Jonah chapter 3 in the NIV.

Jonah 3.

3 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.

6 When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. 7 This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. 8 But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. 9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

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.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Amen, let’s pray.

The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give to you.” Jonah is right back where he started when he ran away from God, and God is right back where he started when he gave Jonah the first call. What this amounted to for Jonah was a second chance. A second chance to listen to God. A second chance to obey. A second chance to walk in step with God and fulfill his call.

We had just seen Jonah running away and falling into an awful downward spiral. Now, here he is right back at the start, and God has given him a second chance. Right now, in the story, Jonah is experiencing the character of God that he knows so well— God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. God had sent calamity to Jonah while protecting his life simply to bring him back to his grace and compassion. And God’s grace and compassion has come to Jonah in the form of a second chance to get right with God. A second chance to walk in the call of God.

A second chance is what we need. There are some here who are in a place where you feel you’ve squandered your chance to answer the call of God. Maybe you’ve ignored God for too long or have managed like Jonah to go through a ton in life running away from his voice. You’ve been on a long scary journey, but it’s gotten you absolutely nowhere. And now you’re looking back at that sea of uncertainty and wondering if God’s will is still valid for you. You might be thinking, “Is there time? Has God’s call been revoked?”

Well, Romans 11:29 says, “for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.” In this passage, Paul is talking about the call of God on disobedient Israel. Despite their disobedience to the Gospel, the favor and the calling of God remains. The promises of God remain. His love remains. God does not withdraw his call; he won’t withdraw what he has graciously given to you. No matter how far you’ve ran from God, no matter how much you’ve refused to use the gifts God has given you for his glory, he will not take that call away from you.

God's call to you remains and his gracious gifts are waiting for you to use in his call. If you have ignored the call of God and your whole life feels like it's been swallowed up by a fish and vomited up on the seashore, well, I want to tell you right now that God allows second chances. He is offering that second chance to you right now. I encourage you to dedicate the rest of your life to the Lord and walk in the second chance that God gives. God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in mercy.

Maybe you've been a Christian your whole life, but you simply ignored that call you heard from God long ago. His call remains, and he has given you all you need to walk in the call he has placed on your life. So don't be afraid to turn to God and walk with him in that call. Let go of your own will, your own ideas about how your life should be, and let God lead you in his call. It's not too late. You'll never leave that sea of uncertainty until you stop resisting the call of God on your life.

In vs. 3, Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh. Again, remember that this was in reality a very long, arduous journey. He would've had to devote himself fully to this call. He would've needed to make serious preparations for such a journey. Once he set out, it would require days, weeks, maybe even months of hard work to get to where God called him to go.

God's call is serious work, and it requires our full devotion if we're going to get to where God wants us to be. Don't be scared or discouraged by that. When God calls, he makes the pieces fall into place for you to get where he's calling you to go. The journey to Nineveh is not even mentioned in the book of Jonah; however, I think that was by design to tell us that the distance between where you are and where God is calling you to be is nothing. Though the distance may seem great and the perils are many, God will lead the whole way through.

You might be looking at God's call and thinking, well, I need to be way over there for this to become a reality... and I'm right here really far away from there... and that thought might frustrate you or make you feel defeated before you even begin. Well, don't worry about the distance. Don't worry about what lies between here and there, just start your walk in the call with God today. Be serious about it, devote yourself to it wholeheartedly, and God will make up the distance for you.

Jonah went to Nineveh and started proclaiming a five-word message— just five words in Hebrew— *עוד ארבעים יום ונניוה נהפכת* (Od arba-im yom, ve neniweh Nehpaket), meaning, “yet forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown.” Now, the city was so large that it would have taken Jonah three days walking to proclaim his message to every corner and alley, but he only needed one day for the entire city to hear his message.

Now, one thing we need to remember about Jonah is that he was very reluctant to obey God in this particular calling, and he was still reluctant to obey God even in his obedience. So, he wasn't running from God's call anymore, but he was kind of doing all this out of spite. Yes, he made all the preparations for it, he was serious enough to make the long, dangerous journey to Nineveh— - getting swallowed by a fish would do that to you! He said to God when he was praying in the belly of the fish, “what I have vowed I will do.”

However, we can see that Jonah's attitude toward the call hadn't really changed all that much. He was going along with it begrudgingly. Once he got to Nineveh, it was bare minimum. A five-

word message and one day. My guess is that he was thinking, “I’ve come all this way to these people, I’ve been eaten by a fish and vomited up, and I don’t even like these people... I’m giving the bare minimum, and I hope I see fireworks! I WANT this city to burn!”

Yet, God used him so powerfully in spite of his attitude so that all God really needed from him was that five word message and one day. Sometimes... maybe many times, God works through us powerfully in spite of ourselves. In fact, sometimes we may even do God a favor by going with the bare minimum. I’m not saying to just do the bare minimum, but I will say that I’ve had many, many times in my life where I had to do the work of God but all I could bring was the bare minimum. I was either spent, exhausted, and worn out, or just didn’t have enough time to put a lot of effort into it. And it’s too painfully often in those times where I’ve seen God do the greatest work.

Sometimes we need to be in a place where there is less of ourselves and more of God. Jonah was in that place. Jonah had just gone through some crazy situations to get to Nineveh, and I bet he was spent by the time he got there, tired and worn out, still reeling from his ordeal. And this was a place he did not want to be, yet God worked a miracle through five words and one day.

Jonah didn’t have to prepare much for his message to the Ninevites... five words! I wish I could prepare a five-word message and see as much success as Jonah saw. For all that Jonah went through, all God needed was five words and one day. In five words and one day, the people of Nineveh, who weren’t even God-fearers, repented of their evil ways.

Vs. 5 says, “the Ninevites believed God.” The Scripture doesn’t say they believed Jonah, it says they believed God. So, these non-believing pagans who were notorious for their savagery saw God in Jonah. There was something about Jonah and his message that opened the eyes of the non-believers to God, such that they fully attributed Jonah’s words to God. What was it that Jonah had that so fully convinced the people that the message was from God and not from a crazed mad man? Well, there is no explanation, and the Scripture doesn’t tell us, but I can guarantee that it was the work of the Holy Spirit.

When God calls us, he gives us the Holy Spirit to accomplish the purposes he has for us. 1 Cor. 12 says that the Holy Spirit has given us gifts for the common good. We often think the gifts of the Spirit are for use in the church, but the truth is, God has gifted each of us by his Spirit to show himself to a non-believing world. God calls you so that he can reveal himself by his Spirit to those who don’t know him. The calling is really all about God, not about us. The calling is really all about the Holy Spirit working freely through us to reveal God. Jonah completely missed that from the beginning. He was making the call of God all about himself and his own desires.

The use of our gifts are not meant to magnify ourselves or to satisfy our own desires. When God gives you a gift and calls you to use it, he’s doing it to show himself, to reveal his glory, to make his name known in an unbelieving world, not to make you well-known in your circles or highly respected. The purpose that God calls you to, and the gifts that he gives you to accomplish that purpose, should lead people to see God rather than you.

It’s too easy to want to accomplish something for God to make a name for yourself. When God calls us to his purposes and gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, he does so to reveal himself. Let the Holy Spirit work transparently through you to reveal God to those around you. Amen?

In the rest of the chapter, we see that the Ninevites, led by their king, put their belief in God into action and repented. They fasted, humbled themselves, and called urgently out to God. In vs. 10 we see God's response to their repentance: "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented..."

Before we close, there are a couple observations I want to make here. One is the compassion of God toward Israel's bitter enemy. I had mentioned in the first sermon the thought that the Jonah story may have been written to provoke the stubborn Israelites to jealousy so that they would repent and return to God. Even in their rebelliousness, the Israelites were very stingy with God; they didn't want to share him with anyone, and especially not with their bitter enemies. So, there's a lot of speculation that God showing compassion on the pagan Ninevites was meant to make the Jews jealous so that they would return to him.

That is an interesting thought, but I think the Jonah story is way bigger in that we see God's heart for unbelievers. His heart is compassion, love, and tenderness. God wants to be the shepherd of the lost sheep. His desire is that none should perish but that all should come to repentance... All people, even the bitter enemies of his own people. Jonah had a huge problem with that, but we should not. Right now, modern day Israel's enemies are essentially our enemies. We see a few Arab nations chanting "Death to America," and it's hard not to want to see God rain fire down on their heads. Well, there's a hidden church right there in the middle of those Arab nations, and we need to take on God's heart of grace and compassion, love and mercy toward our enemies. Maybe the Spirit will spark a great revival and turn our enemies into our friends. Amen?

The last thing is God's change of heart. God spoke through Jonah that he was going to destroy them in forty days, and he did not do it. What was it that caused God to not follow through with what he said he would do? Repentance. My friends, repentance has more power than we may ever know. Repentance can change the course of history. God has a soft spot for repentance—if there's anything that will catch God's eyes and stop him in his tracks, it's genuine repentance. It seems that in God's sovereign control of all things, he has built in contingencies to allow for repentance.

What is at the heart of repentance? A restored relationship with God. That is why Jonah got a second chance, that is why Nineveh got a second chance, and that is why God is the God of second chances. Repentance touches the heart of God and restores a right relationship with him. Amen.

Let's pray.