

God's Undeserved Mercy

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Date: 16 June 2019

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[0 : 00] Well, this week I saw the Avengers movie, Endgame, with my boys. I don't know if anyone here is an Avengers fan. I know I certainly love Marvel movies. I think they're marvellous, in fact. So good.

But this was the epic grand finale, if you like. The end of the 22 Marvel movies. That's why it's called Endgame. And it's all about, and some warning for spoiler alerts here, it's all about failure and second chances.

Failure and second chances. So in the previous movie, Avengers Infinity War, the evil Thanos wiped out half of the universe. And then half of the Avengers superheroes also were wiped out. And essentially, the Avengers had failed in their mission, and they were blaming themselves. And so the last movie is really their second chance. It is another opportunity to defeat Thanos, and to do something, and to put things right.

I'm sorry if that makes no sense to you, but this will make even less sense. Iron Man, Tony Stark, he perhaps possibly personifies this failure and this second chance.

[1 : 14] He's the one who has failed throughout his life, and he gets the chance to put things right, and to save the universe. And he does end up saving the universe at the end of the movie by sacrificing himself.

So that's Adventure's Endgame. Failure and second chances. And failure and second chances, it's really a classic plot in movies, isn't it?

In films, most of them have that storyline where somebody's failed, and then they do something to end up saving everybody else.

And normally it comes through them sacrificing themselves, but it comes because they get a second chance. And it's great in popular fiction. It's there in movies, failure and second chance. And it resonates deeply with us as human beings. That's the kind of story that we like to see or to listen to. Why? Purely because we know ourselves that we fail so many times.

[2 : 14] We hate failing, yet we do fail. And what we do when we fail is we just love to get second chances. We love to get another opportunity to put things right, to in some way redeem ourselves, to restore things to how they should be or how they once were.

Second chances are just great. And that's why the story of Jonah is not just a dramatic story for us to read, but it's a story that is relevant to our lives.

Because it tells us that we also fail, but God is a gracious God. He is a compassionate God. He's a God who shows mercy. And so he's a God who gives second chances to people like us.

So God showed Jonah mercy by giving him a second chance. And through Jonah, God extended his mercy to the people of Nineveh. And the great news is that he also extends his mercy to us.

But if we're going to receive God's mercy, then we've got to turn to him. He holds out the offer of mercy, but we've got to turn and receive it from him. In fact, this passage, the main theme is to turn, to turn back to God or to repent.

[3 : 28] And so the Hebrew word for repent, the Old Testament part of the Bible was written in Hebrew originally. The Hebrew word for repent, shup, shup, which means to turn, comes up four times in the last couple of verses, verses 8 to 10.

And this word, to turn, comes up four times. So it's indicating, the author is indicating to us, that this is the striking central message to this chapter.

The big idea is to turn. And so God announces his judgment in order to show his mercy if we will turn to him. God announces his judgment, so we see, in order to show his mercy so that we might turn to him.

So God is both a wrathful judge, but he's also a merciful saviour. We have to hold those two together, wrathful judge and merciful saviour. So let's look at what it means then to turn to God. And the points for the message this morning are on the back of the service sheet. You'll see them there. Three points. Why turn? Judgment. How to turn? Repent.

[4 : 35] Repent. And God's response to turning. Mercy. Why turn? How to turn? And God's response to turning. So first of all, why turn? Well, because of judgment, which we read about there in verse 1 to 4.

These four chapters of Jonah are crafted virtually into two parallel equal halves. So when the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, it echoes the word of the Lord coming to Jonah first time in chapter 1.

The first time, Jonah disobeyed. This time, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and Jonah obeys. But there's a difference here. Because whereas Jonah is commanded in chapter 1 verse 2 to call out against Nineveh, here, chapter 3 verse 2, he is commanded to call out to Nineveh.

Slight difference. Against Nineveh. And then now God's saying call to Nineveh. It's a subtle change, but it's probably meant to prepare us for the outcome.

So despite the fact that the Ninevites deserved God's mercy, we know that they're a wicked and an evil people, here is a hint. Sorry, they deserve God's judgment.

[5 : 46] Here's a hint that God will show them mercy. And it follows on from God's mercy to Jonah by giving Jonah a second chance, despite his failure.

So Jonah needed to receive God's mercy, to experience it in his own life, so that he was then prepared to go to people who also needed the opportunity to receive God's mercy.

So, well, why should we turn to God for mercy? Question. Why turn to God for mercy? Answer.

Judgment. The Ninevites, this people, were under God's judgment for their wickedness.

So Nineveh, you notice, is called a great city. Well, why is Nineveh great? Well, four reasons why Nineveh is great. And they're all here. Verse 3. It was a city important to God.

The city in the original can be translated as important to God. In other words, it was a city that God was concerned for. It was a great city, a city that God cared for, that belonged to God as the Lord of the whole universe.

[6 : 52] It was his, and so he cared. It mattered to him. Secondly, it was great in size. Verse 3, we read it took three days to go through it. Whether it took three days to walk across the city, or three days to visit the city, or three days for Jonah to go around and proclaim this message to the whole of the city, The point is, Nineveh, for its time, was a big city.

In chapter 4, verse 11, we read it had 120,000 people. It was big. Third reason, it was great in wickedness. Chapter 1, verse 2, we read, The Lord said, its wickedness has come up before me. Which meant, fourthly, it was great in lostness. It was important to God, first. Second, it was a great city in size. Third, it was great in wickedness. Third, it was great in lostness.

Chapter 4, verse 11, we read that the people could not tell their right hand from their left. In other words, they couldn't really tell between right and wrong. They were spiritually clueless.

They were far from God. They were under God's judgment, and they needed God's salvation.

That's why Nineveh was a great city. It was important to God because it had so many people who were wicked and lost, people who were hopeless and helpless and heading for destruction.

[8 : 16] And that's really why all cities are important to God. That's why Glasgow is important to God. Because it's full of lost people, helpless people, hopeless people, who are heading towards God's judgment.

And God cares about all of those people. And so the very fact that God has a message for the Ninevites tells us that God announces his judgment through Jonah in order that he might offer mercy.

It's a kind warning from God through Jonah to these people. So there's an opportunity for the people to escape destruction. So what's Jonah's message?

It's there in verse 4. He says, Now, it's quite a blunt message, isn't it? But Jonah probably said more than this.

And so what we've got is really his executive summary, in a sense. But however much Jonah said, the message is clear. In fact, when Jonah uses the word overthrown, it's the same word, overthrown, that's used in Genesis chapter 19 to speak about what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah.

[9 : 25] What God said he would do would be to overthrow. So this is a clear and direct warning. Notice Jonah doesn't say, 40 more days and Nineveh might be overthrown, but 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

So Jonah has got no problems communicating here. He's clearly communicating the wrath of God, that God will destroy these people because of how they're living.

And the king and his nobles, in their proclamation later in verse 9, they pick up on this because they mention God's fierce anger. So the message is clear. The people got a message that God was angry with their sin and he must punish it.

And so while the warning was clear, the people of Nineveh got 40 days to change their ways. And isn't that mercy? I'm sure God could have wiped them out straight away, but he gives this period of time an opportunity to change.

And so whether Jonah announced this message with tears, with sadness, or with glee and gladness, it took guts to say what he said, didn't it?

[10 : 42] Because nobody likes to think that we deserve God's judgment. Everybody likes to think we're good enough, we're better than most people probably, so the people who are less good than us, well, they're the ones that deserve God's judgment.

Nobody likes to think we deserve God's judgment. I guess you just need to walk down Glasgow City Centre and listen to the street preachers. If you don't listen to them, you can see people giving them dogs abuse because they're essentially speaking about God's judgment on our sin.

So nobody wants to accept that God is angry at our sin, let alone that he would punish us for it. And yet God warns us so that we might turn to him for forgiveness because warning somebody of danger is always a loving thing to do.

If we could see from these windows that the flats were on fire across the way, we would go down and tell people in them, get out, your flats are on fire. And if you say, don't be judging me on what I should do with my life, well, no, it's the right thing to do, to warn people because they're in danger. Last week I was out for a cycle with Matthew, my boy, on the Kelvin walkway and we came to a big red sign and it said, road closed, do not enter on the cycle path.

[12 : 04] And so we did what any normal person would do. We ignored the sign and went down just to see what the danger was. And what happened was that the wall that they've been holding up the side of the path with the trees and the bank, the wall had fallen over and half of the bank had fallen onto the path.

And if they didn't fix it with another wall, it would have been a massive landslide. And I guess somebody could have been seriously hurt or even killed if the whole bank fell down on top of them. And we're still here so we can live to tell the tale.

But the warning sign, it's not there to spoil our fun, is it? It's not there to stop people enjoying cycling around Glasgow. The warning sign is there because there is a real threat of danger. There's danger ahead.

And so God warns the Ninevites through Jonah, just as he warns us through Jesus, that we must face God's wrath for how we've lived our lives because of our sin.

But God is willing to show mercy. He'll show mercy if we turn to him. Because unless we're aware that we deserve God's judgment, then we'll never cry out to him or seek mercy from him.

[13 : 22] Jonah, he'd learned the hard way through a storm, then sinking down to the sea and then being swallowed by a fish. He'd learned the hard way, but God had given Jonah a second chance despite his failure.

And through Jonah, he gave the Ninevites a second chance, an opportunity to turn to God. And God shows this undeserved mercy to every single one of us.

To everybody in the world, God is willing to show mercy. And so the book of Jonah is great because it shows us what God is like. God is far more compassionate. God is far more gracious, far more patient, far more forgiving than we deserve.

If you think about how we treat people, we can be so impatient, so angry when people fail us or let us down. And yet God is never like that, is he?

That's what Jonah is saying to us. God doesn't write us off despite what we've done. And maybe you're here today and you really need to believe that that is true, that you may have failed in some way, but God wants to show mercy.

[14:37] It doesn't mean that God doesn't care about our sin. Clearly, from Jonah, he does. And it doesn't mean that he's not angry or he will judge because clearly he will, but he wants to show mercy.

And so we should never think that there's no way back with God or that what I've done is so bad that I have wrecked everything beyond any point of things ever being fixed again.

It's never game over with God. And that's why Christianity is the best news ever because all other religions or philosophies, all other false gods, when you fail, failure is final.

In Christianity, failure is never final. And that is good news for people who fail just like us. So that's the first point. Why turn? Judgment. The second point, how to turn, is repent.

In verse 5 to 9. So when the people of Nineveh heard God's message through Jonah, how did they respond? They responded by repenting of their sin. And that word repent might not be a word we use much today, but it simply means to turn.

[15:57] To turn. And that's why there's this emphasis here on turning. And so what we see here is how to turn. The Ninevites illustrate what this turning, what this repentance looks like.

So if we want mercy from God, then we see four stages here of repentance. And the first stage is believe God. Verse 5, the Ninevites believed God.

First stage of repentance, believe God. So they heard the warning, but it was a warning they heard from God. Came from Jonah's lips, but they knew it wasn't Jonah's message.

They knew it was God's message. And that's why they took it seriously. The threat of judgment coming at them over the horizon resulted in an immediate response.

They had to do something about what God had said. They believed it would happen. Because what God says is true and it will happen.

[16:53] We don't need to be under any illusion that God will do what he says. And so that's the first stage in repentance of turning. It is to believe God. Believe what God says.

The second stage is to humble yourself. Verse 5 to 8, humble yourself. Let's read those verses again. The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed and all of them from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth.

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. 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, 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. So there's a fast. Everybody puts on sackcloth, even the animals. This was a moment of national mourning.

[17:56] Whenever there's a moment of national significance, people do get dressed up in certain ways. I guess in our own country, the latest might have been a royal wedding, where even the horses will get dressed up for this moment of national excitement or joy or celebration.

Well, here's a moment of national mourning and of shame. And so in the ancient world, putting on sackcloth was a sign of mourning, a sign that you were in the wrong and you were penitent, you were grieving and you were humble.

And so the people of Nineveh are acknowledging that they've done wrong. There's no more pretending for them that everything is okay. They didn't hide behind their wealth, they didn't hide behind their fancy clothes, they didn't hide behind their Facebook updates, giving the impression that everything in their lives is fine.

There was shame and there was humility. And the king pictures this perfectly by getting up off his throne, the one with the power, he replaces his royal robes with sackcloth and then he sits down in the dust.

A sign, a picture of weakness, of worthlessness before the true king, the Lord God Almighty. And so if repentance is to be genuine, then we need to humble ourselves before God and not pretend everything is fine or that we really are sorted.

[19:30] Repentance means acknowledging we're not sorted. We failed and we need forgiveness. And we also need to realize, just as the king did, that all our titles, all of our positions, all of our successes, all of our privileges, really count for nothing before him.

No matter how religious we've been or how good we've been or how much we've achieved, actually when it comes to God, we need to humble ourselves down into the dust and realize we've got

nothing that we can add to our lives so that we might deserve his salvation because we don't deserve it.

And so that's the next stage of repentance. It's humbling ourselves. Believe God, first of all. Humble yourself, secondly. And then thirdly, turn from your sin.

Verse 8. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Repentance involves a deliberate turning away from sin.

And so while the sackcloth expressed sorrow and grief, it had to be accompanied by action or else it was a worthless gesture, wasn't it?

[20 : 44] The people had to stop their violence, their idolatry, their immorality because we can't, if we want forgiveness from God, we can't coexist with sin.

in our lives. Because repentance means turning away from sin. Not dancing around with sin, not trying to accommodate sin, but trying to get away from sin.

And so for the pagan Ninevites, it would mean for them no more torturing people, they were good at torturing people, it would mean stopping their witchcraft, it would mean boarding up their brothels. Because that was part of their life. For secular, Westerners like us, is more likely to be smashing the idols we worship by refusing to bow to the gods of money, of sex, and power through sacrificing much of our lives and our time to these false gods.

And so repentance for us will mean turning from greed towards generosity. It will mean turning from selfishness towards service. It will mean turning from sexual immorality towards holiness and purity and faithfulness in relationships.

[21 : 59] That's what repentance involves. So that's the next stage of repentance, of turning. First, believe God. Second, humble yourself.

Third, turn from your sin. And then fourth, beg for God's mercy. This is in verse eight and nine. We read, let everyone call urgently on God. Who knows?

God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. So the people are urged to cry out to God to have mercy on them.

And so while repentance means believing God, it means humbling ourselves, it means turning from our sin, we can only avoid God's judgment if God shows us mercy.

And the Ninevites get this. And so they, like the sailors in chapter one, they acknowledge that God has got the right to do whatever he chooses to do because he's God.

[23 : 04] So he's got every right to destroy them in his wrath if he wants to and he's got every right to show them mercy in his love if he wants to. So the king's not assuming here that God somehow owed them mercy because of all the stuff that they did, all the sackcloth and everything else.

That's why he urges the people to beg for it. And so for us, we must come to God begging, pleading for mercy, knowing that we really don't deserve it.

And yet we plead to him for it because he's a gracious and a compassionate God. So we need to repent. That's what these verses are saying.

We need to turn back to God. As individuals, we need to do it. If we don't believe, then we need to turn from our sin and trust in Jesus Christ. If we do believe, repentance is a daily thing that we need to do.

But it's not just as individuals we need to repent. Our society needs to repent as well. Even if people don't realise it or would put it in those terms.

[24 : 15] Because deep down, in our heart of hearts, we all know that our world would be a better place if people turned from sin and turned from evil and turned from wickedness.

Life would be better. It's just that the turning to God bit, that postmodern people, that people these days just don't think is necessary.

So who doesn't, there's a question, who doesn't want people to give up their evil ways and their violence? In Glasgow, in the UK, in the world. Every politician, teacher, sociologist, counsellor, social worker wants people to turn from evil and violence.

Even if they don't use those terms because they know that in our families and in our communities, in our towns, in our villages, in our cities, we would have less oppression, less injustice, less poverty, less crime, less racism, less abuse, less pain, less suffering, if we could just change people's behaviour to stop them doing all these bad things, evil things, wicked things, and to be good.

Instead, life would be better. And yet we also know that new policies, stricter laws, better education, increasing people's self-esteem, and giving greater freedom isn't really bringing this about.

[25 : 39] Why? Well, because the only thing that is going to bring deep and lasting change is genuine repentance in people's hearts.

When people turn from God, society doesn't get better, does it? It gets worse. It becomes more evil, more violent, not less.

Even to the extent that we don't even regard what goes on as being evil anymore. We don't see it as wicked. It just becomes normalised behaviour.

So, for example, we should be able to decide, surely, what we want to do with our bodies. My body, I do what I want. We should be able to kill unborn children if it doesn't really suit us.

I was reading last week, England and Wales, in 2018, there were over 200,000 abortions. In Scotland, 2018, over 13,000 abortions.

[26 : 39] It just becomes a normal part of life. Or we should be able to assist in suicide if it's going to suit us or help us. Or we should just let our primary school aged children choose whatever gender they want to choose.

And yet, if we simply ask, well, how is this all working out? How is this going in society today? Is it making society a better place to live in with less evil and wickedness and pain and suffering?

Is it really? Well, the evidence doesn't indicate it is, whether as individuals or as a society. We've got far more mental health issues, far more depression, far more anxiety, far more poverty, far more suicide, far more drug and alcohol abuse, far more family breakups, far more loneliness, and so on, and so on.

And so the only answer really is turning back to God. Turning away from God isn't working. Turning back to God isn't. And that's what the people of Nineveh discovered.

They discovered they needed to turn back to God. And so the repentance of Nineveh in Jonah chapter three is actually the repentance that Jesus wants from all of us.

[27 : 58] Just listen to what Jesus said when he spoke of Jonah. This is in Matthew chapter 12, verse 39 to 41. Listen to what he says, Matthew 12, page 978, if you want to look it up.

But he says, a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.

Listen to this bit. 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 something greater than Jonah is here. So after Jonah preached, the Ninevites repented. But Jesus is saying he's greater than Jonah.

And so now the call to repent is far more urgent. And the guilt for refusing to repent is far greater. So Jesus is warning that if the preaching of this unimpressive prophet led people to repentance, then how much more should the message of Jesus Christ lead people to repent today.

[29 : 21] So in other words, we've got no excuses if we reject what God is saying here. If we ignore God's warning as individuals, as a society or culture, then we pay the price.

Judgment will come. So it's the second point, how to turn, repent. First, why turn? Judgment.

Second, how to turn, repent. Thirdly, God's response to turning is mercy.

See how God responds here? It is beautiful. Verse 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 Ninevites, repentance is met by God's mercy. And this is paralleled in verses 9 and 10. So verse 9 says, who knows, God may yet relent.

Then verse 10 says, God relented. It is wonderful. God relents from punishing the people of Nineveh as he threatened. And yet, as we read this, you might think, well, this is a troubling response from God.

[30 : 36] Like, is God changing his mind here in how he's acting? God is not that God changed his mind. It is that God is being consistent with his character.

God is being true to his unchanging or maybe immutable, as it's sometimes called, his unchanging nature. So just listen to what God says in Jeremiah about prophetic warnings, of which this is one. Jeremiah 18 says this, So God's decision not to destroy is in keeping with what God had planned all along.

He warned of judgment, why? So that he could show mercy. And so Jonah's prophetic warning produced the result that God desired, that the people seized the opportunity to repent and God showed them mercy.

That's why Jonah gets so angry when we get to Jonah chapter 4, because Jonah didn't want God to show mercy to people who deserved judgment. And maybe we're the same, we think those people are evil, they deserve God's judgment, they should never receive mercy.

[32 : 02] That's how Jonah was feeling when we get to chapter 4, Jonah's mission, you see, was a success. He didn't really want it to be a success. And so while it might have worked out in a way that Jonah never expected or wanted, it worked out in a way that the Ninevites needed.

And so the announcement of God's judgment was good news for the Ninevites because they received God's mercy. And it continues to be good news for the world because we all must face God's judgment.

But the problem is our sin merits God's wrath, so we're not going to stand up well in that judgment before a pure and holy and righteous and perfect God.

And so we deserve to be condemned because we've turned away from him and lived our way instead of living his way. And yet, in his compassion, God shows mercy when we turn to him.

And so whoever we are and whatever we've done, we can ask for God's mercy and we can be sure that he will give us mercy.

[33 : 21] And he will relent from bringing upon us the everlasting destruction that we deserve. Well, how can we be sure that he'll do this? Well, the answer is perfectly explained and displayed at the cross of Jesus Christ because that's where God's justice was satisfied.

Jesus was punished there on the cross for our sin so that we could be pardoned. You may have heard in the news last week about the tragic death of a woman who was struck by a bolt of lightning as she climbed with other hill walkers near Ben nevus.

And her death was described as a freak accident because that kind of thing doesn't happen. And yet the death of Jesus Christ was never a freak accident. But Jesus was struck by the lightning bolt of God's wrath as he hung on the cross.

That's where the punishment for sin and evil struck Jesus with such intensity that he is the one who took the full force of God's anger so that we need never face it.

The judgment of God fell upon Jesus Christ so that the mercy of God might fall upon us. So let's make sure that we turn from our sin and trust in Jesus Christ because Jesus is our only hope for you, for me and for the world.

[34 : 49] Amen.