

# Our Repenting; His Relenting

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[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. Do please take your seats. And if you could reach for a Bible, we'll be turning back to the book of Jonah. If you're with in one of the church Bibles, we're on page 929, Jonah chapter 3, but it should appear on the screen as well.

Then 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 you.

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. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

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.

[ 1 : 26 ] 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.

Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. 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.

Amen. This is God's word to us. Let me add my welcome to Jonathan's. I'm Ash. I'm a trainee minister here at Christchurch Glasgow. And it's a delight to start the new year with you all as we continue this series.

I want to start with a question. What is the key to a great gospel mission? It's a good question to ask.

How do you stoke revival? How do you convert unbelievers? Well, if we modeled ourselves on Jonah, this is what we'd do. We'd take the most evil, powerful people that you can find and send a man recovering from a traumatic nautical ordeal and who hates the people and doesn't want them to be saved to go and tell them that they're going to die.

[ 2 : 53 ] Obviously, this isn't a great mission plan. If we passed a hat round after the service for the shouting, death is coming at people, we hate mission 2026, none of you are going to put an awful lot into that.

And yet in this case, it worked. And to understand why it worked, why God chose to use this frankly terrible prophet to speak to such terrible people, we need to understand the characters at play.

And so today we'll look at God's judgment in three contexts. The great Ninevites under God's judgment, the good news of God's judgment, and the grand narrative of God's judgment.

As we look at these first verses, one of the first things we'll see is the greatness of Nineveh, how emphasized it is across this whole book. It starts in chapter 1, verse 2, when God calls the city great.

In chapter 3, it's exceedingly great, or literally greatly great. It took three days to go across this greatly great city. But not, mind, great in the sense of good.

[ 4 : 02 ] This is a terrible and wicked place at the head of a terrible and wicked empire. Terrible, yes, but great. And the point of emphasizing this greatness is to give an even bigger picture of the greatness of God.

It's a bit like in the movies when they'll show you this powerful character, and then just get another character to just come and obliterate them like they're nothing.

And then you really understand how big this new guy is. Well, as he writes the story down, that's what Jonah's doing. If you flick through the book, you'll see he's been doing it all along. He's doing it with the greatness of the world and the greatness of God.

You know, there's a great wind. There was a great tempest. But God calms it. There's a great fish, and God directs where it should go. There's a great city with a great king, and that king humbles himself before the great God.

And so that's why the story so labors what Nineveh is like, because it's all the more extraordinary when you see just the totality of their humble reaction.

[ 5 : 11 ] The people of this place hear this five-word message. That's all it is, I think, in the Hebrew. Seven for us. Forty days, and you'll be overthrown. And they believe God, put on sackcloth, and call for fasting.

Then the word reaches this fantastically great king of the great people of Nineveh, and he believes it. And he puts on sackcloth, but he also sits in ashes and decrees not just that they should fast from food, but from water also.

And not just the people, but the cattle also. This is no small thing. It's hard, isn't it, for us, when we can almost see our breath coming in front of us, certainly on the way over here we could, to imagine the heat of modern-day Mosul, which is where this was.

But fasting from water is a frankly dangerous thing to do. This isn't some small act of contrition.

Now, actually, the king so firmly believes that death is, in fact, coming upon him and his kingdom, that there's no actual added risk in this dangerous fast.

This is a submission of mortality to the God who has warned them. What's the risk in starving yourself and not drinking water when obliteration is coming upon you?

[ 6 : 29 ] He believes, God, that they're going to die, and the only possibility of salvation, the only possible chance that they have is if this God relents.

So they'll do anything. They'll do absolutely anything because they've believed that God's judgment is coming. But before we examine their repentance, I do think it's worth us perhaps pausing to consider this state that they're in.

Consider what it's like, what it looks like for a whole nation to be descended into sin. It's interesting, isn't it? And it calls for concern. How sin can overwhelm a community or overwhelm a culture, or in this case, a kingdom.

How people can, in fact, grow in sin together, just as we in the church try to grow in righteousness together. The fact that we can keep each other's and our own blind spots in the blind spot.

Because we do, in fact, live in a culture that is sick. And it's easy for us to just go along with so much. Just think about the laws that have been discussed or passed in Parliament over this past year with regards to the killing of people at either end of life.

[ 7 : 53 ] And yet think how inoculated we have been against those evils because we're in and amongst it. We must see in Jonah how a culture can be overwhelmed with sin.

And how God's justice and God's mercy can be a perfect antidote to it. Because God's judgment will, by the way, always come upon evil.

And the terror of that can be quite hard for us to fathom. For these men and women in Nineveh, I imagine so much more.

They know that they've done evil. They truly believe that God's judgment is coming. How would that feel? To believe such a message shouted at you from the streets.

Well, as you think on that, I want to say today in our second point, that God's judgment, the message of God's judgment, is in fact good news.

[ 8 : 58 ] And that's a hard thing to say, isn't it? People don't like to hear about judgment. And I want to give you three reasons why I think we don't like to hear it.

Perhaps they'll seem rather obvious, but it's worth going through. And the first of these reasons is this. And that's that we don't actually believe that sin is bad. We don't fully consider how evil sin is. Many of us feel uncomfortable talking about judgment because deep down we don't think anyone deserves it. We certainly don't deserve it, we think. But no one does.

No one deserves that, surely. Yet some of us will buck that trend. I have a couple of good friends who do in opposite ways. One good friend called Tom, who works as a criminal prosecutor.

And he has some stories that should not be shared around meal tables. He has no problem believing that some people deserve eternal judgment. On the other hand, I've got another very old

friend whom we in our family simply call the Geordie.

[10:03] He's from a very different world to Tom. He himself said the first time I met him, someone was talking about the degree that they just got, and he said, the only letters I have after my name are GBH, Grievous Bodily Harm.

And he earned those letters. And if you asked him, he would absolutely say, yes, I deserve death and hell. But if you kept chatting to Geordie, you'd see him realize it wasn't just the drunken bar fights of his youth that made him say that.

It was all of his broken relationships, his angry words to loved ones, his selfishness, all the things that describe me just as well as him.

And if you kept chatting to Tom, the prosecutor, you'd realize that it's not just people he's prosecuting that he thinks deserve judgment, it's him. He sees evil and he understands it.

Now, they are very different people from very different backgrounds, and they have two things in common. That they've either seen or been the very worst that humanity has to offer, and maybe you think that's why they believe that judgment is good.

[11:15] But I think it's actually the other thing that they have in common that causes that. You see, they've both read their Bibles front to back, and in the pages, they've met and come to know the living God, the perfect creator of the universe.

You see, you don't need to have seen terrible things in order to believe that judgment is good. You only need to have seen God. Have you ever put something truly white against something you thought was like a clean white wall, only to discover it's not clean or white at all?

When we judge one another, we tend to have the kind of scale that puts something a bit messier up against that wall. The scale that says, anyone slightly worse than me is evil.

Anyone better must be a saint. And most of us are pretty much fine. And maybe it's bothering someone in here just a little bit that I seem to be gearing up to say the opposite of that, that most of us aren't pretty much fine.

You see, we need to understand not the very worst of the world, but actually the very best to see that we are well below the standards of God. Otherwise, we can go around pretending that we're one of the good ones.

[12:32] But the mask does slip, doesn't it, when we have a moment of honesty with ourselves. I've stolen this analogy from a friend, but it's a good one.

He pointed out that a survey a few years ago revealed that most people would rather be mugged than audited. It's not a sign of a clear conscience, is it? We don't truly believe that we're above judgment.

We don't truly believe that we're worthy. We just like to look at the people who are slightly worse than us and think of ourselves as righteous. But when compared to the eternal God, no.

There can be no question that judgment is right. Well, here's another reason that we don't like to talk about judgment, and that's frankly because we don't believe it's coming. The thing that makes it seem so unkind to us is that we think that we're saying something that's just not true.

Why does the world hate the message of God's coming judgment and call us evil if we warn against it? Well, it's a bit like with climate change. The more or less you believe the urgency of that situation, the more or less you mind the destructive stunts carried out by the likes of Just Stop Oil.

[13:53] The reality of it affects how you respond to the people calling it out. If you're ashamed to admit to people that you believe in judgment, well, then maybe it's that you think it makes God look bad, which is kind of the first point, or maybe it's because you're not completely certain it's coming.

And so, of course, it would be unreasonable for you to be telling people. Because if you did believe judgment was coming, then, of course, surely you and I would be sharing such a warning with our loved ones, with our family and friends.

Although, that feeling just there actually raises the third reason we don't want to talk about it. The feeling I get when I say things like that, the feeling many of you will have just had, and that's because it's just too painful a topic.

We don't want anyone to face God's judgment, judgment, and yet we feel so helpless when we think about it. So we just leave it alone. This third reason, we don't want anyone to perish, but I've spoken here before of the good news of judgment in this way, that God, in fact, takes sin seriously, that God takes abuse and violence and betrayal seriously, that it is good news that God judges because it means that he doesn't just ignore evil.

Evil in this book comes up before the Lord. That's the language of Jonah, like a stench. It fills God's nostrils in chapter one and three, and he decided to deal with it.

[ 15 : 29 ] And yet, the primary way in which the book of Jonah shows that God's judgment is good news is that it's delayed. Jonah did not come, point at the sky and say, look, fireball, and come and wipe out Nineveh.

No, Jonah comes and says, 40 days. 40 days. That's how long until God's judgment. The news of God's judgment is great news in part because it is a coming judgment, not an arrived one.

God sends his word of judgment ahead of time, and when people repent, he relents. And we see here God's constant response to repentance.

repentance. And by the way, just a short aside, if this apparent change in God's mind is a problem for you, we will look at it next time, but suffice it to say that the whole reason Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place is that he knew that God intended to forgive them.

This isn't a story about God being unreliable, it's the opposite. Jonah very accurately predicted God's reliable, gracious behavior. 40 days is the message.

[ 16 : 45 ] And that 40 days, I mean, listen carefully after the service, I'm sure you'll hear someone or other, possibly me, counting to three in front of their children. Now, the point of that count is not just to build up a sense of dread and impending doom in the children.

No, it's an opportunity, isn't it? An opportunity to straighten out, make better choices, get your behavior in line. In fact, in Jeremiah 18, God explicitly says this, that if any time I announce that a nation or a kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, and if that nation repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster.

Well, secondly, Jonah said, in 40 days, Nineveh will be turned over, and I just want to draw attention to that little phrase, that word. That we have as turned over. It comes up rarely, but you will see it in the book of Samuel, when God's spirit comes upon Saul, and he's turned over into a new man.

It's exactly the same word there. So what's going on here, I think, is just as Caiaphas prophesied, without knowing the full range of what he was saying, when he conspired to kill Jesus, he said, better for one man to die than a whole nation to be destroyed.

Well, so too, it seems that here, Jonah prophesied without fully knowing what he was saying. Nineveh, within 40 days, were to be turned over one way or another, whether overturned and destroyed or turned over into a new people.

[ 18 : 23 ] And then thirdly, we see everything that happens is orchestrated by God. Jonah spoke, verse 4, then verse 5, and the people believed who?

Jonah spoke, and the people believed God. The word of God reached the king, and he believes God and repents. And the king's whole reasoning here is based on God's character.

He thinks it's possible that God may relent. Note that he, unlike we've seen in the series seen Jonah and Israel behave, he does not presume, does he, on God's grace.

He doesn't say, like the German poet, is it Heiner, who says, God will forgive me, that's his job. He doesn't say, we're wonderful and faithful.

No, this is repentance. He sees something of God, he sees himself in comparison, and he understands that he deserves the impending doom, and resolves to humble himself.

[ 19 : 33 ] Maybe God will relent, he says, because though he has every right to judge, this is a gracious and compassionate God. God of the Jews was famous.

He was already known amongst the nations. We saw that in chapter 1. The pagan sailors know that Jonah is the source of the trouble, but what is it that makes them the most afraid?

When they find out which God Jonah is disobeying. They can't believe he's been so reckless. What is this you've done, they say, and the king here too knows Yahweh and knows just like Jonah does, that there is a chance that he will remove his anger from them.

And the reason for that is that God always intended his people Israel to be a light for all nations. God's judgment is a great leveler and so is his salvation.

But final point now, what's going on in God's story by putting these two things forward, his judgment and salvation, by putting forth his judgment and offering his salvation?

[ 20 : 45 ] And as we think about this grand narrative behind God's judgment, we do once more need to pause and think, why is this book here? Think about where it's set and think about how the book might have come to us.

Remember, this isn't part of the Assyrian scriptures, it's part of the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish Old Testament. So what Jonah's doing is his ministry to Assyria, but the book is his ministry to Israel. Why is that? Why is this book sent back to Israel? Well, God's demand on Nineveh through Jonah is exactly the same as God's demand on Israel at the same time as we've seen through Amos and Hosea.

Contemporary prophets of Jonah. They condemn Israel for the same evils that Nineveh indulged in. Idolatry, violence, oppression of the poor and so on and so forth.

And God has told Israel that they too will be overthrown. The point is to compare and contrast. Same evil, same message, totally different response.

[ 21 : 55 ] Not least, the lack of presumption. Look at the first line of what the king says. This is not let's twist God's arm and get him to forgive us.

Nor is this God will definitely do it, he'll definitely forgive us. Not that God will owe us if we're good. No, it's maybe God will relent.

Maybe God will relent. We have no right to claim it, but maybe. The opposite of presumption. But back home where Jonah will send this story, Israel is presuming on God's grace, on the Lord's blessing, thinking that they can do what they like as long as they sacrifice to him.

And the Lord replies, I don't want your burnt offerings. Israel acts like God just has a really bad taste in steak.

You know, let's drive our knees into the necks of the oppressed. And then we'll just burn a bull to a crisp and that will get God off our backs. How insulting is that to the holy God?

[ 23 : 11 ] But that's not the point, is it, of the sacrificial system? It's not just a barbecue version of a get-out-of-jail-free card. No, the sacrificial system does many things. But in part, it shows that the right penalty for sin is death.

And the fact that you have to sacrifice constantly, that there's no one-off payment, shows that actually the debt of death, is never fully paid. In Hosea, chapter 8, the people of Israel, the people to whom Jonah sends this book back, they shout to the Lord, my God, we, Israel, know you.

And God replies, no, you don't. You've been ignoring my law and worshipping golden cattle. people. And the Lord says to Israel, stop burning stuff.

That's not what I want here. This is what the Lord says, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. The knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

This is part of the message of Psalm 51 that we sang together earlier. You do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it. You don't take pleasure in burnt offerings.

[ 24 : 20 ] My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart that you, O God, will not despise. In the years to come, Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital, would sweep in and conquer the disobedient Israel.

But the Lord's desire for mercy and to make himself known would endure. Israel will be defeated in battle many more times, but amongst his conquered people, God will send his own son, and his son will achieve all that is lacking.

I desire people to know God rather than keep burning offerings, says the Lord through Hosea. Well, through Jesus we can know God, and through his death we will, in fact, have that once-for-all sacrifice.

Jesus is clear that he fulfills the work of Jonah. He is the one greater than Jonah, he says in Matthew 12. And he says that those who don't listen to him, they will in fact be condemned by these very same people in chapter three, these people of Nineveh, because they repented without the promise of forgiveness, without even being told to repent.

They were just told that judgment was coming. They repented purely in the face of the greatness of the Lord, and the Lord forgave them knowing that his son Jesus was coming to sacrifice on their behalf.

[ 25 : 55 ] And what is it we said earlier that Caiaphas prophesied one man, better one man die than for all. True for Nineveh, true for Israel, true for us.

Because now Jesus has indeed come, and he says he is coming back. We, like Israel, have enjoyed great spiritual privilege in this country, haven't we?

And the warning of Jonah is that privilege leads to presumption, and that's what's happening. That's why Jonah sends this book back to Israel. That's what's happening for the Pharisees in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus offers them a sign of Jonah.

And that may well be happening amongst us as well. These sporadic weeks that we have in Jonah are a good time for us to reflect on that question, and a good test for ourselves is are we willing to put ourselves out there and tell people who don't know Jesus?

Are we willing to tell them of the gospel? Jonah was totally unwilling because his religion was all about himself and his people. Not really about God at all, not at that point.

[ 27 : 05 ] Because had Jonah properly looked at the greatness and the goodness of God, and by the way, I'm persuaded that ultimately he did, which is how the book exists for us, but if he at this point properly understood the greatness and goodness of God, then he would have wanted the whole world to worship him.

Because he is worthy, is he not, of all honor and all glory. Jonah's faith at this point was much more about Jonah. We saw it last time.

Even in great peril in the belly of the fish, he appeals to God on the basis that, I remember the Lord. I resolved to sacrifice in your temple. I will sacrifice, unlike the pagans who worship idols. Yet the pagans were at that moment sacrificing to Yahweh, which Jonah doesn't do.

Well, here's the question for us then. who is God, not God over, for you? That is, of whom do we think God's not their God?

This book has gone to great pains to show the greatness of God over the seas, the creatures, the cities, the nations. God is God over the whole world. God's, well, who are you and I daring to hold back his message from?

[ 28 : 29 ] Or perhaps if you're here and you don't know whether you're really a Christian, well, let me tell you certainly today that God's judgment is coming. I don't have a number of days for you, but I can tell you that it's not a matter of presumption to say the Lord will forgive you if you repent.

It's not presumptuous for us. We have a different message because God has already paid the price for you. Christ has already died in the place of sinners.

Will you accept that that's you? Will you look to the cross and say, that's where I should be, but he is there instead? And if you still struggle with the idea of a God who's angry at sin and who will punish evil, well, that's okay.

But just look at what he does with that anger. He puts himself between us and the consequences of our sin. That's what happened on the cross, that Jesus absorbs the judgment that was due to come to us.

That same Jesus who will one day come and be the judge of the whole world. God's coming judgment is amazing news for all manner of reasons.

[ 29 : 43 ] He's coming to put the world right. Good news. Good news. He takes the evil of the world seriously. Good news. He's coming, but not yet come, because in the words of Peter, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but for everyone to come to repentance.

Good news. But he is coming. God's coming. So now is the time to repent, to turn around and to be overturned into new men and women.

Throw your lot back in with him. And then we can say confidently, just like Tom, the criminal prosecutor, just like my friend Geordie, just like Martin Luther, in fact, who once said when he was reminded of his sin and tempted to despair, he wrote this, I admit that I deserve death and hell.

What of it? For I know one who has made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where he is, there I shall be also.

This is great and good news that God judges and offers mercy. Amen. Let's take a minute to pray.

[ 31 : 00 ] Lord, oh God, as we approach you at the beginning of this year, we thank you.

We thank you so much that in your created, magical joy of new beginnings, that you did not lay that in 12-month cycles, but four days into this year, we remember that, as Jonathan prayed earlier, your mercies are new each morning.

You laid new beginnings in the dawn of each day. So, Lord, may each person here wake tomorrow knowing themselves to be a new creation, a redeemed and beautiful child of God.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.