



READ: Jonah 3:1-4:4, 11 (ESV)

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

"And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

ENTER THE STORY:

Jonah – a story about a man getting swallowed by a huge fish, right? Well, sort of, but not really. That is actually only a tiny part of the story, and it doesn't even drive the MAIN plot.

No, the story of Jonah is about a prophet who knew EXACTLY who Yahweh was... a merciful, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, kind of God. The kind of God who is delighted when he gets to relent from bringing disaster on people. Unfortunately, that was *NOT* a message Jonah wanted to take to the people of Nineveh, a city in the Assyrian Empire, and Israel's sworn enemy.

Nevertheless, God asked him to do just that. He sent Jonah to call out their wickedness and evil because he was ready to bring judgment on them, but just as quickly as the request came in, Jonah headed in the opposite direction, because he KNEW that if the people repented, God would relent, and Jonah wanted God to rain down judgement on them.

In fact, when he boarded a ship headed in the opposite direction and a huge storm came, he knew exactly what was happening and WHO was causing it! He said to the sailors, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land." Some scholars have noted that it's possible Jonah asked the sailors to throw him in the sea because he would have rather DROWNED than see the Ninevites receive God's mercy. If that was the case, Jonah wasn't sacrificing himself because he was repentant, he was STILL doing his best to get away from God. The fish was God's ironic rescue plan to humble his rebellious and disobedient prophet.

Go back and read Jonah 1:16. Did you notice that God gets glory even from Jonah's sinful jaunt to Tarshish because the sailors acknowledged Yahweh as Lord and made vows to him?

Jonah, in trying to avoid sharing God's mercy with foreigners, ends up sharing God's mercy with the foreign sailors.

God must truly laugh at our foolish attempts to do things our way, especially when it directly contradicts his will!

Jonah must have learned his lesson, because once he was vomited up on dry land and God asked him a second time to go to Nineveh, he obeyed. He only went one's day journey into the city, and relayed a short, eight word sermon that went something like this, *"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown."*

It's not the most eloquent gospel sermon, is it?

Now, Jonah might seem like the WORST prophet ever, but this story is recorded for a reason, and we would do well to pay attention. This is a story about repentance—or lack thereof—since we can't be sure Jonah actually repented.

Repentance has been described many different ways, but the essence of it is, *"turning away from something; or a complete change of mindset."* It is a necessary piece to salvation, and it is more than just letting go of something, it is picking something else up. In order to be saved, we must let go of our own ideas and desires, and pick up God's ideas and God's desires and hold them as our own. It also involves a relinquishing of control...over our wealth, our time, our calling, our will, and even our life.

True repentance always involves action...like, for example, what we see with the people of Nineveh. They humbled themselves by taking off their nice clothes and putting on itchy, stinky, uncomfortable sackcloth. They fasted, and they prayed, calling out to Yahweh just in case he was feeling extra merciful. And he was...to Jonah's dismay and disappointment.

This is the posture that is APPROPRIATE before Yahweh! When he sees true repentance, he always responds with mercy, compassion, forgiveness and steadfast love.

It's the same posture some wise men took many, many years later when they brought gifts to a newborn baby...

humbling themselves before the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the Root of Jesse, and the future King.

That same baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, would grow up and tell the people that he was greater than Jonah! Greater because he did *NOT* run away from God when he was asked to do something hard. He was not selfish with his own life. He obeyed and freely offered it up to redeem ALL mankind, not just the Israelites!

Just like Jonah spent three days in a dark fish belly...as good as dead, Jesus spent three days in a dark tomb...actually dead.

And just like the big fish spit Jonah back out on dry land – that dark tomb couldn't hold the Light of the World forever, so after three days, it spit him out (*metaphorically, of course*) alive and well, because God had raised him from the dead!

Jesus has gone through the hard things and overcome them, and he did that so that we can follow in his steps. This season, let's remember that even though it is not always easy to obey God, it is always worth it.

Has God called you to do something you don't want to do? Or are you currently doing something for God that you aren't happy about? Don't be like Jonah, who finally obeyed but didn't experience real joy because of his cold heart. You can trust that whatever God asks you to do, he will equip you to do it, and will give you the strength you need to see it through. We can find TRUE JOY in the hard things because we have experienced God's great love for us!

PRAY: *God, we are SO thankful that your love and mercy are for ALL who repent and believe. Help us find true joy in doing the hard things you've called us to do. Thank you Jesus, for being a much greater Jonah. Amen.*