

THE SURPRISING LOVE OF GOD

Jonah 3:1-10

Open your bibles to Jonah chapter 3. We had a great time at Youth Camp. It's exciting to see our youth so enthusiastic and fired up about God; worshiping Him, learning about Him and wanting to live holy lives for Him. We might think his is a result of the superficial environment and emotions. But I'm convinced that a large part of their passion is simply due to the concentration of time spent singing to God, taking about God and listening to God's word preached. Romans 10:17 says "faith comes by hearing, hearing through the Word of Christ." It has an effect. We're not going to hear 6 sermons but we do have the Word this morning. Let's open our hearts to receive and be moved to faith by the power of the Spirit of God! I've asked Jon Maxim to come read the Word and pray for us this morning-Jonah 3.

We're in our 3rd week of our series in the small book of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet; a man ordained by God to speak on His behalf. But when God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, he didn't like his assignment, so he ran away. He rebelled against God and tried to sail as far away as he could. But God wouldn't let him go; He hurled a killer storm in the path of the boat, Jonah tells the sailors to throw him overboard because the storm is because of him and then he gets swallowed by a big fish (again, compliments of God). And then, after 3 days, the fish vomited him up on shore.

A couple days ago, at youth camp, I was thinking about what that must have been like in the belly of that fish; dark, moist, slimy, smelly. And when I was thinking about that, I happened to have been in one of the boys bunk rooms at youth camp and I thought, maybe it was like this: moist, slimy, smelly and hard to breath. Allen addressed this in chapter 1; the sensational or "un-natural" nature of this story (naturally, it's impossible to live in any belly-oxygen, acid) but this is no less possible than the Red Sea being parted, manna falling from heaven or the 10 plagues in Egypt.

God has gone to great lengths throughout history to show that He is the ruler of all things and as Ruler He has everything at His disposal and He uses His power as Sovereign Ruler to accomplish His will. And what we're going to see today is that His will is motivated by His great love. Jonah was not a faithful servant, but God saved him. The sailors we're pagans, but He spared them. Nineveh was an evil nation but God is sending a warning to them.

In this story, God's love is not just demonstrated toward the recipients of the warning (the Ninevites, evil/bad guys), it's surprisingly extended to everyone. I hope you're not tired of the "surprise" theme because there's more surprises in our chapter today. There's a surprising 2nd chance and a surprising response all coming from a surprising love.

Jonah's Surprising 2nd Chance

Perhaps even more surprising than Jonah having a second chance is the fact that Jonah is still alive to have a second chance. In the Old Testament, the office of Prophet was a very serious thing because they were the voice of God. The penalty for being a false prophet was death. And there's an account in 1 Kings 13 where a prophet was killed by a lion because he disobeyed God. But when Jonah rebelled, God was gracious and patient with him.

God's objective wasn't just to get the message to Nineveh. If so, he could have just let Jonah die at sea. But God wasn't interested in what Jonah could do for Him, He was interested in Jonah. He didn't need Jonah to get the job done. He went after Jonah because Jonah needed God. And He gave him a 2nd

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chance. The first 3 verses of chapter 3 are almost identical to the first 3 verses of chapter 1 with 2 exceptions: in chapter 1 the Word of the Lord came to Jonah and he fled; in chapter 3 the word of the Lord came to Jonah "a second time" and unlike the first time, Jonah rose and went to Nineveh.

Jonah was a changed man; by the grace of God. He learned that God is sovereign, that God was on his side, that God had called him and he was now determined to go. This is the effect of rightly understanding and embracing the loving discipline of The Lord as Hebrews 12:5-6, 11 tells us, *"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."* 11 All discipline is painful for a moment but it leads to the fruit of righteousness. Jonah emerged a changed man and he went and declared the word of The Lord to Nineveh: "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown".

Jonah is obeying God; he has been changed; he's submitting to God. But we have to be careful how we think about change. If we're not careful we can start to think of change as perfection instead of change by degree. Jonah was changed in the fish, not perfected. He's doing what God called him to do but he lacks the heart of God. We're going to see this clearly next week, but I think we can pick it up as he delivers the word of The Lord. "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Talk about to the point. It seems that this is more of a formality.

To a degree, we can understand considering the brutal history of the Assyrians. Going back a century earlier, King Ashurnasirpal II wrote in a military journal, "I destroyed, I demolished, I burned, I took their warriors prisoner and impaled them on stakes before their cities." He also described taking live prisoners and cutting off their hands or nose, ears and fingers, burning them alive, gouging out eyes and even skinning them alive. All this and more was done to intimidate other nations into surrender and, as he wrote, "to constantly establish my victory and strength over the land." If anyone ever didn't deserve mercy it was the Assyrians, the people that Jonah was sent to by God. So this makes the next surprise all the more astounding.

Nineveh's Surprising Response

They not only heard the word of the Lord, they received the message and repented; from the greatest to the least. They fasted, wore sackcloth, sat in ashes and when the King heard about it, He made it a national fast, even included the animals. They took this warning from God seriously. This was a national repentance.

This is unbelievable, because Jonah's 8 word message (what one pastor called the worst sermon ever) didn't include a stitch of hope. He doesn't mention a thing about forgiveness or a way out for the Ninevites. He gives them the promise of judgment and fails to communicate the very grace and mercy that he had just been saved by from his own wickedness. He's saying the words of God but he wants them to die.

This proves that it's not up to us to produce faith in others. Change, repentance, new life comes from God, not us. We do need to obey and act. But we should learn from Jonah; we want to have the heart of God as we do the work of God, but it's God who adds power to our words. It was God, not Jonah, that the Ninevites believed. When you understand how wicked the Assyrians were and how cold Jonah's

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heart was, we can understand better what Jesus meant when he referred to Jonah in Matt. 12:38-41. Read.

The point is repentance; hearing the word of God, receiving it and repenting. Repentance in faith puts us in right relationship with God-it's the solution for everything. Jesus, the Son of God, is the word of God but was rejected by his generation. Jonah was a rebellious, sinful, hard hearted man with a harsh message but Nineveh repented. When they repented, God relented.

God's Surprising Love

God is the hero of the story. This isn't about Jonah learning from his mistakes and finally getting it right for The Lord. Not about Nineveh's ability to reach deep down, past their dysfunctional families, perverted past times and grotesquely brutal treatment of other people to find the inherent good in their souls and decide to love each other and obey God.

This is about a holy and a just God who would be right to destroy all the Ninevites, all the sailors in the boat, Jonah himself and all of us with no warning at all. This is about a God who deserves all glory and worship and who hates sin because sin robs him of His glory. This story is about that holy God being patient with sinners, pursuing the rebellious, giving grace to the undeserving.

Why? Because of His great love for them and us! Jonah was a chosen man, set apart by God to speak the very words of God and he blew it. Nineveh didn't care about God, wasn't looking for God and had terrorized and slaughtered the people of God. And yet God loved them, pursued them, had compassion on them and saved them.

[This doesn't mean that it doesn't matter how we live. There are real consequences to our sin in our own lives and the lives of others. We, in Christ have been freed from sin...and are slaves of righteousness.]

Church, we are Nineveh. We were objects of His wrath, sinful, perverted, glory thieves. But He pursued you, brought you His word-that you are a sinner and condemned by God because of your sin. But then you heard the good news of the gospel; that Jesus died on the cross and absorbed the wrath of God that our sin deserved and removed your condemnation. When you heard the Word of The Lord and believed it, God relented in His wrath. He loved you by pursuing you and sending Christ to the Cross and (by faith) He has poured out His love on you through Christ!

Now you belong to Him. He made you a part of His family and now you're His mouth piece. Christian, you're also Jonah; called and set apart for good works for His glory. But we're flawed servants. Do you ever feel like you're no effective, wonder what's the use, why try?

We fail, fall, we rebel; we still do things that rob His glory. How do you respond when you fail? Do you live believing that God loves you; that even when you mess up, sin or even out right rebel, God still loves you, accepts you, and wants you? Do you believe that God is more interested in you than the task or your sin? Do you believe that even when you fail, God sees you as righteous because of Christ? That because of the complete and finished work of Jesus and your faith in Him, you are securely rooted in the love of the Father?

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Or do you run and hide? Do you try to atone for your sin? Do you set up new rules or time lines for you to get right with God? Do you think somehow time will “smooth things over” between you and God? Maybe He’ll forget? He doesn’t forget! He will never forget. If you live this way and you’re a Christian, the question for you is, have you forgotten?

He loves you. Yes His love is surprising; it’s unbelievable. But it’s real. He loves you with an everlasting love. And His love for you drove Him to the cross. Do you really think He doesn’t know you? Do you really think He didn’t expect a mess when He saved you? That if He knew who you are now, then, that He wouldn’t have gone to the cross?

Listen, God knows you. He knows you’re going to mess up often. He knows you’re going to stumble and be drawn to worldly and wicked things. That’s why He went to the cross. That’s the point. He knew we would fail and stumble and doubt and the cross is a might sign of His love and unrelenting pursuit of us; not in case we need it but because we continually need it. 1 John 4:10 *“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*

If you’re not a Christian but there is a stirring in your heart, God is at work. Invite you to come forward during the song or after the service but if that’s you, please don’t leave without at least asking questions.