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Jonah 3&4 midweekchurch Jonah2 (mid)

Whether we are reading books, or going to the movies or watching a TV show, most of us like a happy ending. You know the one, where it ends with those immortal words "*they all lived happily ever after.*" Just look at the list of the highest earning films of all time or the best rating shows. What do they all have in common? They all made us feel good - for the boy in the end gets the girl, the world is saved, the mystery is solved.

But if you wanted to see a happy ending to the story of Jonah you would have to get a jumbo pack of Liquid Paper and blot out the whole of chapter 4, the last chapter. To many, chapter 3 would be a great ending to the story, it would end on such a high note. Jonah despite his initial protests does preach the good news to Nineveh and they respond and give their lives to God! What a great story.

But the Bible is not always like that, its not just here to make us feel good. And so the book of Jonah ends with a sting in the tail, it ends with a challenge to the idea that everything always works out in the end. But before we get to that, to the end, we still have to discuss chapter 3. And in the first part of chapter 3 we see...

**1. A God of the second chance.** For Jonah has blown his first opportunity to do what God wanted him to do. God said go North East and Jonah ran South West. God said go to Nineveh and Jonah instead went to Tarshish. And because of his disobedience he has ended up inside a big fish for three days and nights and then he was vomited up onto dry land.

But in the first part of chapter 3, God appears to Jonah again and He tells him in v.2 to "*Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message that I give you.*" Now doesn't that seem a bit unusual to you? That God would give Jonah exactly the same call as before. God doesn't simply say to us, "I see that you are not cut out for task A. I will allow you to tackle the easier task B instead." No God says, "I am willing to forgive your failure at task A, and give you another shot at that very same task"

God is offering Jonah a new beginning. In spite of his earlier refusal, he now has a fresh opportunity to please his divine master. But of course this is not the first time God has given someone a second chance. Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Paul were all failures who were given a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance

Because the Christian life is always a series of new beginnings. For when we fall, Satan always wants us to believe there is no hope of recovery, but our God is a God of the second chance. Let us never, ever forget in the words of the Psalmist, "*God's mercies are new every morning*".

But not only is Jonah being offered a second chance, but so is Nineveh. Nineveh in that day and age was made up of cruel and heartless people. And yet God, through the prophet Jonah was even willing to give a city like Nineveh a second chance. Did they deserve it? No way, Hosea. But they got it anyway. For that is the way with God. His love is not just for the Jew, or even the believer, it is there for anyone who will turn to Him, confess their sins and are willing to start again with God as their boss.

God is a God of the second chance, for Jonah gets a second chance and the great city Nineveh gets a second chance. For the word of God comes to Jonah again and says "*go to Nineveh, that great city.*"

But going to Nineveh was not like going down the street to get a bag of jelly beans. Nineveh was some 500 miles away from Israel and would have been a months walk from where the fish spewed up Jonah. So you'd think that a month would give Jonah a great opportunity to prepare a real hum dinger of a message to preach to Nineveh, wouldn't you? A really powerful and challenging sermon with lots of good illustrations and a powerful conclusion?

Well what message did Jonah preach? Jonah 3:40 *"40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned."* Not what I would consider one of the great sermons of all time. Not really a masterpiece of communication. Sort of, a bit short, to the point, I suppose. But that was the message that Jonah preached, and that was the message that saw a people willing to repent.

**2. A people willing to repent.** The Ninevites were convinced of the reality of the true God of heaven—just as the sailors aboard the ship were in chapter 1—not because of Jonah, but in spite of him. For it is not Jonah, but the "word" of the Lord, which does the trick. You see in one way it seems utterly ridiculous, one man preaching to a couple of hundred thousand, yet it is one man with the word of God and armed with the power of God. And that is the difference.

You see God opens up the hearts of the Ninevites & they repent. But how do they repent? What do they do to show that they are sorry for their sins? Well we see from v 5, that they do 4 things - they believe God, they fast, they put on sackcloth and they place themselves under God's compassion.

Repentance will always start when we believe, when we take God at his word. That is why the word of God is so important for both the Christian and the non-Christian. As the apostle John was later to say, *"The man who says, 'I know God,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him."*

The Ninevites believe God's word and they declare a fast. Now it seems the only people that fast nowadays are people who want to lose weight. But fasting has always been a way in which in the midst of our busy lives we decide to take the time that we would normally be eating and preparing a meal and spend that time with God. We give up something of importance to remind ourselves of something of the utmost importance. So what was the last thing of importance, real importance that you gave up, to concentrate instead on your relationship with God? Well after Jonah preached, the Ninevites fasted, they didn't eat food so that they could put all their efforts on their relationship with God.

They wore sackcloth, clothes made of course goat hair that was extremely uncomfortable but which showed everyone they were in mourning their sins. A bit like how people wear black to funerals today. And they put themselves under the mercy of God. Who knows God might show us compassion they think. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

And God does give them a second chance. God does relent, he does show compassion for he is a God of grace. Because God judgements are conditional. As the prophet Ezekiel says about God, *"I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways & live."*

And because that is still true today, God warns us, he pleads with us, to turn from our sins & to come to him for forgiveness. He wants us to repent & the way that the Ninevites respond to God's message

through Jonah is the way he wants us to respond today. To believe him, to spend time with him, to mourn our sins and throw ourselves on His mercy. And if you have never done that before, God is giving you a further chance to avoid judgement. He has his arms out open wide, so don't ignore him again tonight.

**3. A prophet in a huff.** So we have a people willing to repent, we see a God who is willing to give them a second chance and we see a prophet in a huff. For with Jonah, it is was all OK when God gave him a second chance, but its not OK when God gives Nineveh a second chance. It was great when Jonah turned to God in the belly of the whale, but it is a disaster when the Ninevites turn to God with prayer and fasting. It fills Jonah's soul with joy to see his own salvation, it fills him with anger to see his enemies salvation.

Jonah behaves a bit like a spoilt brat. A bit like the kid who when given out in cricket, picks up his bat and his ball and goes home. For Jonah firstly reacts angrily to God & he explains that that was why he ran away from the call of God in the first place. He ran because God is so gracious & compassionate. He is a God who relents from sending calamity.

You see Jonah wants these guys to get it in the neck. He wants them to burn in hell. "They are an awful people Lord. They commit atrocious crimes. They don't deserve your forgiveness." And so he finds a spot on the hill, for the 40th day to pass hoping to have a grandstand seat of his enemies destruction. He shows more love for a plant that God provides for him, than he does for a city of 120,000 kids or some ½ million adults.

In the end we see a miserable man, more concerned with his own reputation, with his own creature comforts, more concerned with the plight of a soulless plant, than with the souls of a 1/2 million people. We see a man who has called a city to repent, but is unable to repent himself. We see a man who wants to keep God's forgiveness all to himself.

But do you know when I first became a Christian, I was a bit like Jonah. I joined a youth group, I gave my life to Jesus, I found a group of friends who loved me and cared for me. And I had no intention of telling others about Jesus. You see I had finally found my niche. Things had finally come together for me and if others came into the group, if others became Christians my world would change, and I didn't want it to change at all. When I was a young Christian I was more concerned with my own wants and needs than in anyone else's salvation.

I wonder if we in the Church are any different? There are many today who want Church done the way they are comfortable with it, so that *their* needs would be satisfied, not those who are lost. Or then there are some who when they are challenged to share their faith with a neighbour or a family member don't do so because its hard and they might be rejected. They are more concerned for their own comfort than for someone else's salvation.

For you see, the problem with Jonah, is probably the biggest problem with the people of God today. They are pleased with God and overjoyed with him when they experience His compassion, His grace. But they don't want to share it with anyone else.

Apparently there is a mural on the wall of a building in Ruedesheim, Germany. It tells the story of Jonah with the familiar scenes. One has a picture of the great fish, another of the ship, another of

Jonah looking over the city of Nineveh. However, in the Ruedesheim mural, the city of Nineveh is not Nineveh; instead, it is the skyline of Mainz, the nearest city to Ruedesheim! Underneath the mural these words are written: "*Nineveh is the city nearby that needs to hear the prophetic word.*"

Nineveh is Terranora, it is the Gold Coast, it is Brisbane. So tell me when you look out on that city what do you see? Do you see a city of crime, of violence. Or do you see a city that needs to know the love of God? Do you see a city to be avoided or a city to be embraced? Do you see the problems & the dangers or do you see the opportunities? For how we answer these questions determines whether we have learned the lesson of Jonah or not.

**4. A Question left Answered** As I said at the start, the book of Jonah doesn't end with a happily ever after conclusion. It actually ends with God speaking, or more correctly God asking a question. And that question is "*Should I not be concerned about that great city?*"

Well should God? Should God only accept the decent people in this world? Should God waste his time with a whole lot of people that have spent their life turning their back on him? Should he?

This is the critical question in the book of Jonah. And it harks back to the critical verse in the book of Jonah and that is the chapter 2:10 "*Salvation comes from the Lord*". If salvation comes from the Lord and not by good works. If salvation is a gift and not to be earned, then surely that gift needs to be offered to as many people as we can? Surely those of us who have received God's grace for nix, for nothing, would want others to experience what we have experienced. What do you think?

But in conclusion I'm left with another question. How did Jonah respond? Did he stay angry? Did Jonah change or remain unchanged by him seeing God's grace first hand?

The great painter Michelangelo was convinced that Jonah did accept God's mercy. That he was the one who actually wrote the book of Jonah and became a preacher of grace to Israel through his book and through his work as a prophet of God. For on one of the walls in the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo has a painting called The Prophets and Apostles, where he has tried to capture the faces of all the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. And out of all the faces Michelangelo painted, none has a more radiant smile than Jonah. For Jonah finally gets it, he finally understands God's grace.

Is that really what happened? I suppose God only knows. But probably a more pressing issue for us is how are we going to respond? Are we going to keep God's grace to ourselves or are we going to share it with others? What do we think about our city of Nineveh? And how will God paint us - with a radiant smile full of God's grace, or with a selfish, tight fisted attitude? I suppose that is up to us and how we respond to God's word this evening.