

Finding Hope in the Mercy of the LORD

Jonah 3:1-10

Every year as I am reading through the Bible I am amazed that the people of Israel survived.

Just think, for example, of when they came to Mount Sinai and Moses was up on the mountain for forty days receiving God's law on their behalf.

Despite all the miracles they had witnessed with their own eyes after just forty days they make a golden calf and worship it.

In Exodus 32 God tells Moses that He is ready to destroy the people because of their sin and the stubbornness of their hearts.

When Moses hears this he immediately pleads for the LORD to show mercy towards the people and the bible says that *"The LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people."*

That is just one example among many in the Bible of God holding off on giving people the punishment that they deserve.

Why does He do that?

He does that because one of the significant aspects of His nature and character is mercy.

In fact, when He shows Moses His glory in Exodus 34, the first character trait the LORD declares is His mercy.

That is why the people of Israel survive, because God refrains from giving them what they deserve.

[That is true for more people than just the nation of Israel; that is true for absolutely everyone who has ever lived. Understanding that is essential to understanding the gospel. That is what we are going to turn our hearts and minds towards this morning in the portion of God's word that is before us **Jonah 3:1-10**. In this passage we meet people who deserve destruction, but instead of destruction they receive God's mercy and the lessons we learn from their experience show us why we can have hope before the maker of heaven and earth Who is just in all that He does. In order to find that hope we first need to see that...]

Point #1 – People need God's mercy. (Verses 1-4)

If the LORD were to give us what we deserve we would all spend eternity under His just wrath in hell and so if there is to be any hope at all...

Verses 1-2 of chapter three are almost identical to chapter 1:1-2.

The first time God had said this to Jonah he tried to run away, he ended up on a boat in a big storm, got tossed into the sea, swallowed by a giant fish that he spent three days and nights in, and finally he gets spit out on dry land.

All of that happens to Jonah because of God's mercy.

What Jonah deserved was to be struck down the moment he said no, but because instead God sent a massive storm that did not sink the boat.

He sent a massive fish and kept Jonah both from drowning and from being digested.

God gave Jonah mercy in his disobedience so that he would have another opportunity to obey.

Neither the LORD nor His instruction has changed, but His mercy gave Jonah the chance to change.

As Matthew Henry puts it, *“The Word of God is an unalterable thing, and will not be made to bend to the humours either of its preachers or of its hearers.”*

Because that is true the LORD says to the prophet, “Go to Nineveh and call out against it.” (Verses 3-4)

John MacArthur points out that Jonah’s journey to get to this city was probably about 500 miles which wouldn’t have taken about a month.

That is a long journey upon which he would have to arise every day and obey the command of the LORD, which is in itself God’s mercy.

The task is daunting, the city is massive according to the standards of the ancient world.

Commentators are a bit divided as to how to understand the ‘three days journey’ here.

Some think it refers to the circumference of the city walls (about 60 miles), others think it refers to how far you would have to go to walk up and down all streets proclaiming the message.

Either way, the place is huge and it is filled with people who are anti-God and anti-Israel and he went up and down the streets declaring that these people had forty days left until their destruction on account of their evil.

What could be done? Could they run away? Who can escape the LORD?

Could they undo what they had done? Impossible!

Could they get the LORD to change His opinion of their life choices? Not a chance!

These people are completely guilty and deserve fire from heaven to reign down on the city and put an end to their evil ways.

The only possibility for them is for God to hold back giving them what they deserve, they desperately need mercy.

[Back in WWII a number German POWs were sent to Northern Ontario. If you know the area you know the bush can be a pretty harsh place. There is a story of two Germans escaping the camp, but after a couple of weeks of getting eaten alive by bugs, scrapped up, and going hungry they decided to return to the camp. If they had stayed in the bush they certainly would have died. They were men in need, they needed the mercy of the people running the camp.]

That's the Ninevites! That is us!

That is every human being who has ever lived.

We are people who have broken God's laws and we have no capacity at all to either undo what we have done or make up for it.

Every time we break God's Word we are doing more than breaking a rule, we are showing contempt for the infinite glory of the LORD.

We are making a giant mistake if we try to make our sins into something small, but if we can really see the depth of our problem then we will see that if we are to have any hope at all, we need the LORD to be merciful towards us.

[Most people benefit from God's mercy without even knowing it. Rarely if ever does God bring immediate judgement as soon as people deserve it. That kind of mercy, however, is a temporary deal eventually everyone who persists in evil will face the consequence of their action. If we are to find a lasting hope we need lasting mercy from the LORD. How do we receive that? The example of the Ninevites shows us an important aspect of the LORD being merciful towards people in an enduring way. They show us that...]

Point #2 – Receiving mercy depends on believing God. (Verses 5-9)

The only way we will seek to escape the judgment of the LORD is if we actually believe that He means what He says.

It is left unsaid how long Jonah had been preaching between verse 4 and verse 5.

What does seem clear is that his message had been heard by a significant number of people in the city.

“You guys have forty days left and then that is it for this city.”

The **beginning of verse 5** tells us something amazing.

If the text had said they believed Jonah that would be impressive enough.

It's bigger than that though, it says, here that they 'believed God'.

They understand that the message that Jonah is preaching is a message from the LORD.

How easy would it have been to ignore the prophet?

They could have thrown him out of the city, or in prison, or worse, but instead they come to the conclusion that he is telling the truth.

Look at how their believing God's message is expressed in their actions. (**Verses 5b-9**)

The putting on of sackcloth is an expression of mourning or sorrow.

It is a coarse material that would have been uncomfortable to wear.

It was cheap, the kind of garment that displays severe poverty.

In this case it is their spiritual poverty that is being expressed.

Even the most important person in the city, the king, trades his regular clothing which was intended to communicate his power and importance for a covering of utter lowliness and humility.

This is more than sorrow over the coming destruction, this is clearly an expression of grief over the things that they were doing that had invited God's decree of destruction in the first place.

Besides wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes, the king decrees a fast for all the people and he even goes so far as to include the animals of the city as well.

While the length of the fast is not stated, the pervasiveness of it is crystal clear.

The idea is that everyone in the city would express their humility and sorrow to the greatest possible degree and call out to God.

This is more than religious ceremony, notice the decree of the king in verse 8, he commands that *“everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands”*.

He is acknowledging that God is right to threaten this destruction.

How they have been living deserves the punishment that the prophet has declared.

What they are doing here is agreeing with God.

Without that there is no hope of receiving mercy.

[Today is mother's day. How many of you have or had a mom who told you things to keep you safe? Things like, “Look both ways before crossing the street!” or “Don't touch the hot stove!” or “Chew your food before you swallow”. If you are wise you trust your mom and you listen to what she says. If not you are putting yourself in danger. If you don't believe your mom sooner or later you are going to get hurt.]

How much more is that the case with the LORD?

How many people, some in this room, have heard God's word proclaimed and it travels in one ear and out the other?

How many times has God's word been opened to you and you have stared off into space not paying attention?

Even worse how many times have you listened and said, “I'm not doing that, I'm going to decide how I live?”

My guess is that there are many in this world who say they ‘believe in God’ but live and act like they do not believe what He says.

No doubt Jonah preached to the people of Israel many times warning them that their idolatry and sin would lead to their destruction. They claimed to believe in the LORD but they did not turn from their ways.

Here we have people who knew little to nothing of the One true God and yet when they hear from Him

they believe what He says, they feel sorrow for their actions, and they seek to turn from evil towards what is right.

[They do all this in the hope of the LORD turning from ‘His fierce anger.’ There is no presumption of grace, they know what they deserve. There is simply hope in the possibility of mercy. That brings us to one more lesson from this passage. We have seen the need of mercy, we have seen that the possibility for mercy depends on believing the LORD, and lastingly we see here that...]

Point #3 – God is merciful towards repentant people. (Verse 10)

Those that persist in actions contrary to what the LORD commands will get what they deserve, but those that turn away from evil towards what is right will be spared destruction.

Look with me at **the first part of verse 10** there is something very important there that we need to pay attention to. (stop at ‘evil way’).

What is important to see here is that the LORD knows that the Ninevites are genuine in their sorrow, in their fasting, and in their turning from evil.

It is impossible to fool the LORD.

It is possible to put on an act for people, I’ve seen that more than once.

But no one can hide from the knowledge and presence of God.

He knows the Ninevites have heard and believed the word He sent to them through Jonah’s preaching.

He knows that they have truly acknowledged their evil and are genuinely seeking to turn away from it.

And because that is true we read this in the **second part of verse 10**.

I believe the next chapter of Jonah makes it clear that this was God’s intent in sending Jonah to Nineveh in the first place.

He wants to show mercy to these people who are totally lost in sin.

Why else would he warn them? Why give them forty days? It would have been perfectly just and right to wipe away the city without a word in advance.

Instead, He tells them of what their evil deeds deserve.

What we must understand about this message Jonah delivers is that it is a real threat.

If the Ninevites had ignored Jonah, the city would surely have been destroyed, they would have gotten what they deserved.

Instead, the repentance that the LORD desired is brought about through the preaching of disaster and God responds with mercy.

[Quick show of hands, how many people have ever been pulled over for speeding? I was pulled over once when I was a student at Fanshawe College. I had to run an errand in between classes was going faster than I should have been. I knew I was guilty and apologized and the police officer

showed me mercy. About fifteen minutes later I drove passed him again in the opposite direction making sure my speedometer was locked in at the speed limit and I drove past still very thankful to have been let off. What do you think would have happened if I went blazing past a second time? I probably would have ended up with two tickets which is what I would have deserved. Why? Because we know there is a connection between mercy and repentance.]

The LORD is merciful beyond measure brothers and sisters and His mercy is far better than anything we can receive from other people.

You see unless the officer who let me off paid the value of the speeding ticket that I deserved he sacrificed justice for the sake of mercy.

God doesn't do that. He can't do that because He is perfectly holy and just. His mercy comes at the cost of His Son Who died on a cross and endured the fullness of God's wrath on our behalf.

Jesus took what we deserve so that God can show mercy and maintain His perfect justice.

That mercy is yours if you come to Him in repentance and faith.

The truth is all of us need mercy.

People left to themselves are every bit as bad as the Ninevites.

The question is, will we believe God or a lie.

You can believe you are good on your own, you can believe that you can live however you want and get away with it, you can believe there are many roads to God, you can believe things like that and go to eternal destruction, or you can believe what God says.

You can believe that you are a sinner who deserves judgment, you can turn from the evil that is in your heart, and trust in Jesus to receive God's mercy.

If you truly humble yourself, the LORD will accept you on account of Christ.

The only thing that keeps anyone out of heaven is the hardness of their own heart.

Oh that the Spirit would soften hearts like He did in Nineveh so that people would turn from destruction and find eternal and glorious hope in the mercy of the LORD.