Jonah: The World's Greatest Fish Story
Jonah
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Let's open the Bible to Jonah, the book of Jonah. It's just four chapters, one of the minor prophets. And you know the story. We've gone through the story in years past, but in connection with the book, I want to reiterate it one more time to you. The opening chapter of Jonah is set in the midst of an intense storm, a really intense storm. Modern meteorology has documented the development of tropical cyclones in the Mediterranean Sea, which is where this takes place. A violent tempest, we know from meteorological records, can reach an excess of 90 miles per hour--that is hurricane level and even beyond that--and create surging waves as a result of those kinds of horrible, terrifying winds. And this is the kind of storm that one might assume was going on in Jonah's story. But really it was something qualitatively different than that.

Let's look at chapter 1 and let's understand what the storm really was. And we could start in verse 4, "The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up." This isn't a natural storm, this is a supernatural storm. This is not one that basically was generated by some natural cause; this was generated by God Himself. This is a violent storm that God created supernaturally.

And undoubtedly the seasoned sailors who were on the boat along with Jonah had seen their share of storms and had encountered their share of challenges while trying to sail the Mediterranean on other occasions. Undoubtedly they survived, listened to the tales of horrible storms in the past, and they probably told some themselves. But this storm that slammed into the helpless ship was something massive, some kind of a barricade of on-coming water, the likes of which they likely had never seen. Tongue and groove planks that composed the ship would have begun to splinter and pull apart under the overwhelming pressure and crashing of these waves--wave after wave after wave, crashing on the decks, the crew becoming white-knuckled, panicked, unable to do anything as far as normal course of action to defend themselves. They cried out in a panicked desperation. This storm must have felt supernatural, and maybe a little bit personal to them. It must have been, they thought, some god that was offended. They even understood was not a storm that could be explained naturally. This storm had to be explained supernaturally.

So the story of Jonah takes place at the outset in the midst of this storm. And before we look at the storm, let's go back to the beginning of the book, just briefly, and see the prophet commissioned, verse 1 and 2. "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.'"

The prophet here is commissioned to go and cry against the city of Nineveh. The mandate is clear, unmistakable--preach a message of judgment, preach a message of warning. Tell them that God is going to judge them. Nineveh is the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. And this is his commission.

Now we all know his response. He goes the other direction. We read in verse 3, “Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa on the coast of Israel, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.” Now that was his response. His reaction is to get out, to run the other direction, to flee as far away as he can possibly go. He doesn’t want anything to do with going to Nineveh and preaching to the Ninevites. So he runs, absolutely the opposite direction that God told him to go. He has no interest in obeying God whatsoever.

Why? He’s a racist, basically. He’s a racist with a rotten attitude. He’s just a bad-attitude prophet, just a melancholy, bitter kind of down-in-the-mouth, bad-mood prophet. And he has no interest whatsoever in obeying God. So he goes the opposite direction from where God told him to go.

Well, that sets up the story, as you well know. Jonah is fleeing the opposite way and the storm comes. And the storm is to catch the attention of Jonah, as you well know. And in order to get the attention of Jonah the Lord has to get the attention of the Gentile sailors who are sailing the ship. Let’s meet Jonah.

In verse 4, “The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea. There was a great storm on the sea so the ship was about to break up. Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god...threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.” If they can get the ship up out of the water a little bit, there’s less likelihood that it will fill with water. “And Jonah, who had gone below into the hold of the ship, laying down and fallen sound asleep.” Now you’ve got to be pretty tired to sleep in a situation like that. But there he was sound asleep in the hold of the ship. The boat may have been tossing and turning, splintering, but Jonah’s asleep.

So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you’re sleeping?” That’s the question I would ask. There really isn’t an answer. “Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”

“Each man said to his mate, ‘Come, let us cast lots so that we may learn on whose account this is happening.’” Who’s responsible? The bottom line is: in paganism somebody on this boat has offended a god. We need to find out who it is so that he can do something to appease the offended god. “So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.” By the purposes of God it was Jonah who was sorted out of the group by the casting of lots. That’s just a silly way to find something out--a primitive way, a pagan way--but God used it to point directly to Jonah.

And so, it fell then to Jonah to be recognized as responsible for angering his God, or the gods, in bringing about this life-threatening storm. So they go to Jonah, and they confront him. And the confrontation takes place in verse 8. “They said to him, ‘Tell us now!’--‘tell us now!’” We don’t have a lot of time here. “On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country and from what people are you?”

Who are you? They’re trying to figure out who this is and where he’s come from and who he’s associated with--dig down to get to the bottom of all of these frightening issues. I just put the story together at that point. Jonah had been told to go to Nineveh, a great city, and cry against that city because of its wickedness. This is a prophet now, remember, this is a prophet. What do prophets do? They preach. They warn. They pronounce judgment. They call people to repentance. This is a

prophet. This is what prophets do.

But instead of heading toward Assyria and the capital city of Nineveh, he gets on a ship going to the westernmost part of the Mediterranean. Tarshish is essentially Gibraltar. He's going to go all the way to where the Mediterranean dumps into the Atlantic. But he would soon learn what we found out today when we read Psalm 139 that "even if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, Thou art there"--"Thou art there." He didn't want to go to the Assyrian capital, which was clear to the east, way off in the desert next to the Tigris River--and by the way, an exceptionally large metropolis. It is modern-day Iraq; that's Assyria, Nineveh.

It boasted in ancient times a population--and this is really amazing--a population of 600,000 people; exceptionally large city. It had been built originally by a man named Nimrod. You remember that name from Genesis 10 and 11. Nimrod was the great-grandson of Noah. Do you remember what he was famous for building?--the tower of Babel, which caused the languages of the world to be changed as a judgment. Nineveh then was the ultimate pagan capital. And every Ninevite, every Assyrian, was, as far as Jonah was concerned, a pagan enemy and represented everything evil and everything that Israel hated. Nineveh was as wicked, by the way, as it was impressive. The Assyrians were brutal; they were vicious; they massacred their enemies; they mutilated their captives; they are known to dismember and decapitate, burn people alive. Indescribable gory forms of torture mark their behavior toward their enemies. And they posed, and had posed for a long time, a clear and present danger to the national security of Israel. And by the way, only a few decades after Jonah's mission, the Assyrians would conquer the northern tribes of Israel and take them captive, 722 B.C.

So they had been an enemy, and in the future they would be a devastating enemy, removing the ten tribes from the north, bringing that nation to an end, really. And they never would return from that Assyrian captivity. Jonah ministered in the northern kingdom. He knew the threat of the Assyrians. He hated them. He ministered during the reign of King Jeroboam II, from 793 to 758. He didn't want anything to do with the Assyrians. And amazingly, he didn't want the Assyrians to repent.

Now when you don't want people to repent, that's deep-seated hatred. That's deep-seated hatred. He didn't want to take a message of hope. He didn't want to take a message of forgiveness. He didn't want to take a message of grace to these hated pagan enemies, a civilization of murdering terrorists--violent annihilators of everyone who stood in their path. He wanted God to judge them. He wanted God to destroy them. He had an aggressive hatred toward those people. I'm afraid not unlike some professing Christians might have toward Muslims today. Of course God was fully aware of Nineveh's iniquity and, as I said, a century after Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites during Jonah's ministry, the Lord would come back and condemn that nation that took Israel captive. And He would condemn them through the prophet Nahum; another prophet a hundred years later would pronounce judgment on them. And at that time, Nahum would indict Nineveh for arrogance, deception, idolatry, sensuality, and violence.

So a hundred years later, God was going to destroy the Ninevites. But for this generation alive in Jonah's day, He had plans of salvation for them--a wonderful insight into the sovereign purposes of God. And Jonah was commissioned to deliver the message. But the rebellious prophet didn't want to see Israel's enemies receive mercy. In fact, he knew the Lord would forgive the Ninevites if they repented. Chapter 4, verse 2, "He prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew

that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.'" I knew You'd do this. I knew You'd forgive those people, and I couldn't stand the thought of that.

Now that's racism. That's deep stuff for a prophet. You know, if I was in charge of who gets to be a prophet, I would say, "You're disqualified; I'm taking somebody else." But God is in the business of using the most unlikely people in His purposes.

Well, Jonah knew God was compassionate and full of lovingkindness and mercy, and he didn't want God to act mercifully toward the Ninevites, so he got on a boat and went west. Knew his duty; shirked his duty. You know, you would think that God would just throw him on the dump, throw him on the old prophets' dump and say, "You're done; your career is over." Find somebody else; find somebody else. You've got lots of folks to choose from; you don't need this guy."

But here again is this wonderful reality that God is in the business of using the most unlikely and sometimes the most unqualified people. And by the way, Jonah was kind of a microcosm of the whole national failure. Jonah was like a living symptom of national disgrace. The Jews, the people of God, were placed in the world as a witness nation. They were to declare to the world the one true and living God. They were to take the message of the one true and living God to the polytheistic, polydemonistic world. They were to be a light to the Gentiles. They were the chosen people, not as an end, but as a means to an end. They were to be a nation of missionaries. They were to be zealous for other nations to love and worship the true God. And they were to give corporate testimony of the greatness and the goodness and the power and the mercy of their God as demonstrated in their lives and declare their God to be the true God to the world and invite the world to come to know the true and living God. Instead, they became racist and full of hate and animosity, and that's why God allowed at a later time the Assyrians to come and obliterate the northern kingdom for good.

Within the nation of missionaries, God selected certain specific prophets to lead the missionary task. And their responsibility was to proclaim the true God beyond Israel. In fact, if you survey from Isaiah, where the prophets are begun in the Old Testament, all the way through to Malachi--go through the five major prophets and twelve minor prophets--if you go through those prophets, you will find that they not only prophesy to the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, but they prophesied prophecies concerning Amon, Assyria, Babylon, Edom, Egypt, Elam, Hazar, Kedar, Medo-Persian, Moab, Philistia, Phoenicia, Syria, Tyre and all nations.

They ministered, the prophets did, primarily within the borders of Judah and Israel: Judah, the southern kingdom; Israel, the northern kingdom. They ministered inside the borders, but they gave prophecies and declarations directed at the nations surrounding them. Jonah's calling was unique. He was sent out of his nation to go to Nineveh, which was unusual for a prophet to leave either Judah or Israel. He prophesied about the nations and against the nations outside, but in Jonah's case he actually was called to go to the capital of Assyria. Israel not only failed to be a missionary nation, but Israel rejected the prophets that God gave them. Israel rejected their God-given prophets. Jesus said, "You killed the prophets, you stoned the prophets, you failed in your missionary task, and the God-appointed men who were to call you to that missionary task you hated and you killed."

So there's an awful tragedy brewing in the land of Israel, as there would be a little later in the land of Judah, as an unfaithful, arrogant, apathetic people caught up in nothing but superficial worship of

God. At the same time, worshiping idols and living any way they wanted to live, failed to do what God has called them to do, and failed to listen to the messengers that God has sent. Jonah somehow has imbibed this anti-evangelism mentality--and he's a prophet. He's supposed to be calling the people to do this ministry of proclaiming the true God to the nations. And he himself is reluctant to do it.

I think, in a sense, Jonah is sent to Nineveh to shame Israel, to shame Israel. You say, "Well, what do you mean by that?" Because when he went, the whole city repented and believed and was forgiven and redeemed. And what a rebuke that was against all those Jews who had nothing but animosity, bitterness and hatred toward the nations around them, and were unfaithful to take the message of the true and gracious God to those nations. What a rebuke it would be to find out that if you had done that, this could have been the response. The heathen city of Nineveh repented at the preaching of a reluctant prophet. You remember Jesus used Nineveh to admonish the unbelieving Pharisees of his day who refused to repent at the preaching of the greatest of all prophets, with all the evidence that he was the Lord and the Messiah. If the heathens would repent in Nineveh over the preaching of a reluctant, racist, bad-attitude prophet, they're going to be better off in eternity than the Pharisees who wouldn't repent when the Lord Messiah came Himself. So this is a double rebuke to Judaism, a rebuke to them at the time of the prophet and at the time of Christ.

Now most Christians know the names of the Hebrew prophets. You know Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. You know Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi--familiar names because they're there in your Bible. But we don't all know a lot about their message. And some people say, "Well, it's a minor prophet." It's a minor prophet in the sense that it's a brief message. They're not less important than the major prophets; their message is just briefer. No word from God is less important than some other word from God. Jonah, however, is the one minor prophet, as they're called, that everybody knows about because of the amazing character of his story. Backward, grudging, recalcitrant, racist, you would have thought that God'd just chuck him and get somebody else. But God doesn't do that.

Verse 11, chapter 1, let's pick it up again. They said, the sailors, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us? For the sea was becoming increasingly stormy." And now they know that this man is disobeying his God and they have one option in their pagan sort of superstition: "Let's see if we do something to him if this will pacify the God who has been offended and calm the storm." He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you."

He's right. He gets it. He knows this is a direct work of God. They're reluctant to do that. They have a certain amount of human love. They don't really want to do that. The men rowed desperately in verse 13 to return to land, but they couldn't for the sea was becoming even stormier against them. Then they called on the Lord and said, "We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased." Now they have come to understand who Jonah's God is--the Lord. And they're praying to the Lord and saying, "Look, we don't want to toss this guy in the water because that's going to put blood on our hands and then we're going to be guilty and we're going to be in trouble. We don't want to put him in the water."

"However," verse 13 says, "the men who were rowing desperately"--were only fighting against an impossible situation because it became stormier. Their prayers weren't going to help. So verse 15 says they finally "picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging."

Then there was a little revival on the boat. “The men feared the Lord greatly...they offered a sacrifice to the Lord...made vows.” I don’t know the full extent of that. But I think when Jonah explained to them who God is, they listened and they understood. And then when they saw the demonstration of the miraculous ceasing of the storm, they understood that this was the true God. They had never seen anything like that because none of their false gods could do miracles. They became believers in the message that Jonah gave them. It just may be that you might meet those sailors in heaven.

Well, meanwhile, we find Jonah, “And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.”

You know, it would have been enough to just get rid of Jonah. I mean, why go to all this trouble? I don’t know what efforts in one sense God had to go to create this kind of fish, big enough so that a man could float around in its stomach. We don’t know any details about it except we do know that there is a word in Hebrew for whale and that’s not the word used here. So this is not some kind of a warm-blooded mammal; this is some kind of fish, cold and wet, unimaginable, indescribable--a three-day stay inside a fish, cramped in clammy darkness, suffocating stench, gastric acids of the fish eating away at his skin, constant motion of the fish, changing pressure of the ocean depths, absolutely nauseating. It is a miraculous thing that he is in the fish, that the fish was prepared for him. It’s a miraculous thing that he survives in the fish. Don’t ask me about the breathing part; I don’t know about that. But I know he’s humbled, and you know his prayer; we commented on it a few weeks ago. He’s in the fish and he prayed, verse 1 of chapter 2, to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish. He says, “I called out of my distress to the Lord...He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol”--he’s looking back and remembering his prayer in the past as he writes this. He’s rehearsing his prayer. “You had cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me and all Your breakers and billows passed over me. So I said, ‘I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.’”

He thought when he went into the water it was over as he fell down deeper into the billowy sea. Then he survived and he turned to worship. “Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever...You have brought me...brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. While I was fainting away, I remembered the Lord...my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple. Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, but I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord.”

He’s having a worship time before the Lord. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, there’s no specific request here, but there’s a desperate cry in this situation. But what he turns to is worship…worship and he knows that God is his only hope. And he makes a commitment to God that I will sacrifice to You with a voice of thanksgiving that which I have vowed, I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord.

“If You save me out of this, Lord, I will serve You, I’ll keep my promise to You. The vow that I made to You when I confessed You as my Lord and my God.” Out of those suffocating and unimaginable circumstances comes this amazing prayer. The man who recoils at the thought of God extending mercy to Assyria, now knows that God better extend mercy to him or there’s no future. Now he wants to have a God of grace and a God of compassion and a God of mercy and a God of lovingkindness. And he knows that his only hope is in the goodness of God. And God, true to form, graciously answers his prayer and verse 10 says, “The Lord commands the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto

the dry land." I don't know how the fish got to the dry land, or I don't know how far the fish projected that man when he threw him up, but he landed on ground. Near death experience, for sure. Submerged in the depth of the ocean, comes to God with a worshiping heart, praising God, promising God he will be faithful. Wet, disheveled, slime-covered, unthinkable condition on the beach, he has repented.

Now, could God use him at this point? Apparently He can, and this again comes back to the issue of unlikely hero because the Lord recommissions him, He recommissions him. Verse 1 of chapter 3, "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time." Let's try this again; hit the reset button. "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I'm going to tell you"--arise, go to Nineveh. Do what I told you the first time. Preach the message that I tell you.

So this time verse 3 says, "Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the Word of the Lord...Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' walk." As I said earlier, Nineveh's on the banks of the Tigris River. I would think 500 miles northeast of Israel. According to historians, magnificent walls; the inner city was surrounded by eight miles of walls. The rest of the city had a circumference that extended to sixty miles around--very large metropolis. The name Nineveh is thought to have derived from *ninus,* which would derive from Nimrod and means "the residence of Nimrod," or *nunu. Nunu*, by the way, an Akkadian means "fish." So maybe this was fish town, which would be an appropriate name.

Why would they call a town "fish town" if it was 500 miles from the water? Well, 'cause they worship the fish god, Nanshe, the daughter of Ea, the fish goddess of fresh water, and they also worshiped the fish god Dagon, who had the head of a fish and the body of a man. Fish were of particular importance to the Ninevites--fresh water fish and these fish gods. So when Jonah arrives he had a good fish story for fish town. And some historians actually think that he may have well have looked like an albino because the fish's stomach acids may have bleached his skin so that he arrives in Nineveh with a distinctly white, almost ghostly, appearance to tell his fish story.

Well, Jonah's message was more than a fish story, it was a threat. Chapter 3, verse 4, "Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'" Nineveh will be destroyed; forty days Nineveh will be destroyed. And he just kept saying that and saying that and saying that all day as he walked.

And then in one of the most understated verses in all of Holy Scripture to describe a monumental, miraculous working of God, you read verse 5, "Then the people of Nineveh believed in God." Really. I would like a little more detail about just how that happened--six hundred thousand people, pagan people, worshiping Dagon, worshiping Nanshe, living lives of pagan idolatry with all that goes with it; a vile, wicked, evil people doing horrific things, slaughtering people, decapitating them, dismembering them. What the people of Nineveh believed in God? "And they called a fast...put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them."

"When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered him with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. He issued a proclamation and it said, 'In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."

A gentleman came up to me this morning after the service and he said, “You know, I’m concerned about my salvation.”

I said, “Why?”

He said, “Because I think the only reason that I really want to be saved is to escape hell.”

And my response was, “That’s good enough. You may actually mature to the point where you see the positive blessings of being a believer, and you will mature to the point where you will love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, at least in a relative sense, and you will long to honor and serve Him, and love will overpower fear. But fear is where we all began.” This speaks to the issue that people who evangelize today by constantly saying, “God loves you with an unconditional love; He loves you with an unconditional love, don’t you want to be loved by God?” miss the point. The prophets and Jesus Himself and John the Baptist who said, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come, you snakes?”, always introduce the message of grace and forgiveness by warning the sinner of the consequences of his sin. Hundreds of thousands of people in Nineveh turn to the Lord in repentance.

Now there have been all kinds of people who have tried to explain this. Liberal commentators say, “Well, there were recent military defeats that put the people into fear.” Another writer says that there were earthquakes and eclipses that terrified everybody. Somebody else suggests there was civil unrest. There is no natural explanation for a massive conversion of hundreds of thousands of people. There’s only a supernatural explanation, and that is that God determined to save that city in that generation. And He used a rebellious prophet to bring a rebellious people to faith in Himself--just a staggering and wonderful story.

The king gets in on it. His name, very likely, he’s either Adad-nirari III, for those of you who are interested in history, or Assurdan III; we know those names from ancient history. Whatever his name, he exchanged his royal robes for sackcloth and ashes and he humbles himself, a public display of personal mourning. And the whole city does that, and then you come to verse 10, “When God saw their deeds and that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He didn’t do it.” God showed them mercy in an astounding impact by a deeply flawed, bitter, racist, antagonistic prophet whom God uses as the human instrument for one of the most massive expressions of divine grace in history. He’s certainly an unlikely hero.

And the story ends in a most bizarre way. You would have thought Jonah would have gone back to Israel and said, “Folks, I’ve just got to tell you what happened. I’m telling you, you’ve got to hear the story.” The whole city of Nineveh repented--the whole city, the king, everybody. They came down, put sackcloth and ashes, which is a symbol of humiliation. You would think he would go back and if nothing else, for his own credibility as a prophet, to tell the tale. Most missionaries would be so elated by this; they couldn’t contain themselves. But not Jonah, verse 1 of chapter 4, “It greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.” That is just so strange.

This is unthinkable. And this is when he says to the Lord, “I knew You would do this, I knew You were gracious and compassionate and slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness. I knew You

would relent on Your judgment on those people." This is so deep in him, listen to verse 3, "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." Wow! "Kill me! I can't stand the Assyrians being converted." This is his worst nightmare. Boy, that's some attitude for a prophet. He had a rotten attitude at the beginning; you can see how really rotten it is at the end. He wanted to be killed the first time: "Throw me in the water." He wanted to be killed. Then he wouldn't have to go to Nineveh. The Lord didn't let it happen. He survived. Now he's back in Nineveh. And now he wants to be killed again.

He is full of prejudice, pride, and he cannot tolerate the magnitude of God's grace to a barbarian nation. He wants nothing to do with this. He would rather be dead than see people converted to Christ--or converted to God, I mean. This is aggravated to such an extreme degree. What he hoped for was that he would preach destruction, go on a hill, wait forty days and watch it come and love every minute of it.

So there he goes, verse 3, "Take my life." The Lord says in verse 4, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" Is there a reason for this? There's no answer to that; of course there isn't. He's simply asking a rhetorical question to expose his prejudice. "Then Jonah went out from the city, sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself, sat under it in the shade till he could see what would happen in the city." Yeah, he's going to plant himself there and hope for the best, and the best is--they all get killed. He's going to hope that God changes His mind.

Well why would God do that? Oh, he's going to hope that their repentance was hypocritical, superficial, short-lived. That's his hope. They didn't mean it. It isn't real. And if I just sit here and wait, God will destroy them all. And he's out there and it's hot and it's in the part of the world that can be blazing hot. Builds a little shelter that's not adequate. "So the Lord God"...I love this, in verse 6..."appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant."

This is a self-absorbed guy, wouldn't you think? But, you say to yourself, what is God doing? I mean, this is grace upon grace upon grace for somebody who hasn't earned anything. He's got extreme heat exposure. He's going to sit there until judgment falls. He thinks and hopes that they all get destroyed. And God adds to his comfort so he's not burned by the sun, and he's very happy. But he's about to get an object lesson.

God appointed a worm, God created a plant, then God created a worm. So "when dawn came the next day, it attacked the plant and it withered." That's a powerful worm, big plant. "When the sun came up, God appointed a scorching east wind [sirocco]...the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die." This is the third time he wanted to die. You know, you'd eventually say, "Okay, die, for goodness sakes, just die."

And the Lord teaches him a lesson. He "had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?" That's how we get the number 600,000 for the city, 'cause there's 120,000 children who don't know their right from their left.

He's full of contempt. He wants to see God condemn a whole city to hell. He's self-centered. What he is saying is, "Make me comfortable and send that city to hell." Boy, that is a twisted approach. And God teaches him a lesson. "You had compassion on a plant to keep you comfortable, and no compassion for eternal souls. Shouldn't I have compassion on Nineveh, that great city?"

And that's where it ends. I wish we had a final word from Jonah, but if he did say anything, it would probably be, "I want to die; I want to die. I just don't want to see that compassion revealed."

So in the end, what have we learned? This is about God, this book. It's on the surface about Jonah but underneath it's about God. What does it tell us about God? Well, we just draw a few simple lessons. First of all, that God is the ultimate hero of the story. He's the one who rescues Jonah. He's the one who gives Jonah the message. He's the one who makes the people hear the message, believe the message, repent and be converted, and come to worship Him. It's about God.

But if you break it down, first of all, it's about God as the sovereign Creator. It is God, you see, who starts the storm, incites the storm. God prepares the fish. God has the fish swallow Jonah. God makes sure Jonah survives. God designs the fish to throw Jonah up on the land. It is God even before all of that who started the wind that set the storm in motion. It is God who then calms the sea. It is God who grows the plant that shelters him. It is God who sends the worm that eats the plant. It is God who whips up the sirocco the next day. It is God who does all of this. It is God who has power over creation. Even the pagan sailors recognize God as the Creator. Surprisingly, the only person in the story who resists God is Jonah. Sailors don't resist God. Ninevites don't resist God, only the prophet of God. You just really are convinced that God ought to get somebody else, but God is in the business of doing mighty, massive work through people that from a human viewpoint would be discarded. And that should be encouraging to all of us 'cause we're all flawed.

Second, we not only learn that God is the Creator who controls everything sovereignly, but we learn that God is a supreme judge. The message that Jonah was to give was the message of judgment--forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed by divine fury and divine wrath. Recognizing their doom was imminent, the Ninevites repented.

And that takes us to the third and final element that we learn about God and that is that God is a gracious Savior. His lovingkindness is not limited by our prejudices, our pride, our indifference. His lovingkindness and compassion and grace is not limited to good people, but to brutal, murderous, idolatrous pagans.

Those three truths then are the heart of the gospel, the heart of the gospel. God is the Creator of all of us. We have sinned against our Creator. Wrath and judgment has been pronounced upon us. But we have been given the gospel, which offers us forgiveness through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. You really see the gospel in the heart of God in the story of Jonah. The Creator God, sinned against, warns about judgment and fully forgives those who repent and embrace Him.

Bow with me in a word of prayer.

Our Father, we thank You tonight for the story again, familiar story of Jonah which reminds us that You are the Creator whom we have offended and sinned against. You are the judge who has pronounced condemnation, eternal damnation, on us, but You are also the God who offers

forgiveness for those who repent and then believe the gospel of Christ. And it is because we have come to believe that gospel that salvation is provided for all who repent and all who believe in You through the work of Christ on the cross, and we believing that come to celebrate that. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for being the sacrifice for sin that saved the Ninevites, even though You hadn't died--it was yet in the future and being the sacrifice for our sin even though it was long in the past.

We thank You, O God, for the provision You've made in Christ. We thank You, blessed Holy Spirit, for giving us life and faith even as You gave to the Ninevites to put our trust in the one Savior.

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