

Jonah – Jonah's Obedience

Having been deposited on the beach by the big fish at the end of chapter 2, here in chapter 3 Jonah is put back on track by the Lord. The commission he was given in chapter 1:2 comes to him a second time but there is a subtle change. The first time he was told to go to Nineveh and “preach against it” but this time he is told to go to Nineveh and “proclaim to it”. The same verb is used “to proclaim” in Jonah 1:2 and 3:2. The phrase in 1:2 was the adversative קרא על (qéra' 'al, “proclaim against”), which often designates an announcement of threatened judgement. However, in Jonah 3:2 the phrase is the more positive קרא אל (qéra' 'el, “proclaim to”) which often designates an oracle of deliverance or a call to repentance, with an accompanying offer of deliverance that is either explicit or implied.

We need to put ourselves in the position of the first hearers of this story to grasp the significance of this change. You can just imagine a group of Israelites listening to this tale cheering when they hear Jonah being told to preach against Nineveh. They wanted to see Nineveh judged, they wanted to be free of its threat to their existence. Perhaps they would have been confused at Jonah's running away from this task or viewed him as a coward not willing to take such a threatening message into the heart of the evil empire. They may have actually cheered when he got thrown into the sea, getting his just desserts. They would have recognised the mercy of God in rescuing Jonah, understood his prayer of thanksgiving and possibly anticipated his vow. Now, were they expecting him to be told again to go to Nineveh? Were they ready to cheer, once more, the command to preach judgement? But now the call is to repentance! This is judgement with a get out of jail card.

Whatever he felt Jonah obeyed immediately and made the journey to Nineveh. It was a large and important city that required three days for a visit but Jonah started preaching on the first day, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” Immediately, the people responded, they believed God and whether great or insignificant they fasted and wore sackcloth. Even the King when he heard did the same and decreed that everyone, even the animals should show these signs of repentance. He proclaimed that everyone should call urgently to God, turn from their evil ways and give up violence. The hope was that this would cause God to change his mind, not show his anger but let them live. That is precisely what happened. God saw their repentance and did not bring his judgement upon them.

So, when Jonah was disobedient God still used him to bring a dozen pagan sailors to repentance but when he was obedient he was used to bring a great city to repentance. What could God do with an obedient church today?

Open

- What do you like about visiting large cities?

Study

Read together Jonah 3

Jonah

1. “Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time”, how was this a further sign of God's grace to Jonah? Who else can you think of in the Bible who had a second chance? (Jonah 3:1)
2. Compare Jonah 3:2-3 with Jonah 1:2-3, what has stayed the same and what has changed? Why the difference?
3. Nineveh is referred to as the “great city” throughout the book of Jonah, in what sense was it great? Why does the writer emphasise it?(Jonah 3:2, cf Jonah 1:2, 3:3, 4:11)

Commit Question

4. In verse 3 “a very important city” is literally “was a great city to God”. How do you think the original hearers would have reacted to that expression? Do you think a city such as London or Bangkok or Beijing could be “a great city to God”? If so why? What should we be doing about it?
5. A visit to Nineveh “required three days” how soon did Jonah start preaching? What was the impact of the message on the people and how did they respond? (Jonah 3:4-5)

Jonah

6. How did the King react when he heard the message? What did he do or say to show that he understood why God was angry with them? (Jonah 3:6-9)

Commit Question

7. Jonah's message was to the whole of the city and impacted every strata of society. To what extent do you think we should be addressing our message to the community as a whole? How can we do this?
8. How did God respond to what the people did? In what way is this consistent with his character and his word? (Jonah 3:9-10, cf Ezekiel 18:21-23, Jeremiah 18:7-10)

Commit Question

9. This chapter is all about God giving a second chance, first to Jonah then to Nineveh. What are the blessings of knowing that our God gives second chances? What are the dangers and how should we avoid them?