

Today is the 3rd week in our ‘Call of God’ series, our month-long look at the one of the best-known stories in the Bible: the Book of Jonah... or at least, as Barry told us during the first week of our series, this short book is one of the Old Testament Bible books that almost everyone says they know something about. Well, actually, what most people say is they know something about the story of Jonah and the Whale... which, of course, isn’t precisely true. There is no whale... but there is a ‘great fish!’ And as Barry so skillfully showed us in the first 2 weeks of our series, this book wasn’t written to simply tell the world the amazing story of Jonah being swallowed by a big fish and then living in that fish’s belly for three days. That aspect of the story only takes up a couple of verses in this book’s four chapters. No, as Barry showed us, this book is actually a parable... and whether a parable originates out of real life events or in the imagination of the author, a parable was always written specifically to get people thinking about deeper truths or moral lessons... and this parable was meant to get people thinking about three specific matters: the first, being our attitudes towards people we don’t consider worthy of caring about at all... and secondly, this story asks us to think seriously about whether we are willing to obey God even when we know obeying will be very difficult and thirdly, and probably most importantly of all, this parable was purposed to get us thinking about the graciousness of God, his grace even to those who do not deserve it. If you’ve not heard both of Barry’s first 2 sermons in this series, I strongly suggest you find the time to do so... but be prepared... both of his sermons will get you thinking! And today’s passage, which is chapter 3 in Jonah, will continue to get us ‘scratching our chins’ as Barry said in his first sermon. Now, the story does take a decidedly unexpected turn in this chapter, but I think you’ll find that this unexpected turn even heightens this parable’s challenge us! So, why don’t we turn to that passage together right now. Jonah chapter 3...

Now as we begin to look at today’s passage, I want to tell you that for a number of reasons, I believe that the last verse in chapter 2 which reads, ‘Then the Lord ordered the fish to spit, (the Hebrew word is literally ‘vomit’) Jonah out onto the beach.’ and the first verse of chapter 3, ‘Then the LORD spoke to Jonah a second time,’ were originally one sentence. I’m happy to talk to anyone about why I believe this, but I honestly feel that the chapter break here, (Which we know wasn’t added to the text until the 13th century) separates what in the author’s mind was actually one moment in Jonah’s life... here’s what I think we’d have found written on the original scroll of the Book of Jonah: ‘The LORD ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach and then the LORD spoke to Jonah a second time.’ I’m certain that God had one thing in mind in this moment: getting Jonah back on land where he belonged and immediately ordering him back to Nineveh! Now, we don’t know **exactly** how much time took place between this vomiting and God speaking to Jonah again, nor do we know where Jonah was when he was vomited up. But again, God only had one plan for Jonah and that plan was to get him to obey his call and go to Nineveh! So, as we begin to look at the first verses in this 3rd chapter, we need to remember that Jonah might have only been moments from being in that great fishes’ belly when, as verse one says, *Then the LORD spoke to Jonah a second time:*² “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh and deliver the message I have given you.” Just one small detail here, the word that is used to speak of the Lord here is Jehovah as in, ‘Then Jehovah spoke to Jonah.’ Jehovah was a name that only the Jews used to refer to their God. Just tuck that fact away for a bit... But the message from Jehovah was the same message he’d sent Jonah the first time he’d spoken to him! ‘Get up and go to the Great city of Nineveh and deliver the message I will give you!’ I think it’s telling that there is no mention of anything from the past in God’s message to Jonah. He doesn’t bring up Jonah running off to Tarshish... he doesn’t remind Jonah that he had to save

him from drowning by sending a big fish! Here is a great example of God being very gracious with his rebellious prophet... he just repeats word-for-word, mind you, his original command to Jonah: ‘Get up and go to Nineveh!’ And then we read, ‘*This time Jonah obeyed the LORD’s command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all.*’ I find it interesting that the author tells us nothing about Jonah’s thinking during this journey... the last words we’ve heard from Jonah are his words of thanksgiving and repentance Barry told us about last week, but we are told nothing about his thoughts as he travels to Nineveh. Ancient readers, though, would have known right away that it was a month-long journey from Jonah’s hometown to Nineveh. They’d have known that Jonah had plenty of time to stew about things like all the terrible things the evil Ninevites were known for doing and whether, now that he was safely back on dry land, he still meant all those things he’d said to God while he was in the belly of that big fish. Oh, and something else about this verse, some of the Hebrew here is a bit confusing. It can be translated as, ‘This time Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh a city was so large that it took 3 days to see it all,’ or it can be translated, as the note at the bottom of our NLT versions says, ‘This time Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh, a city great to God.’ Scholars debate which of these two translations is right. Some say that all this verse is saying is that Nineveh was a very big place. Others say, no, this verse is telling us that this city and its people were extremely important to God.’ Can I just say that sometimes scholarly disagreements like this miss the point. As is often the case in translation fusses, it’s best for everyone to settle down and simply admit that either way we decide to translate this verse, both are true: Nineveh **was** a big place... and this big place **was** extremely important to God! Enough said!

Verse four then says, ‘*On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: “Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!”*’ Boy, that’s one stark announcement, isn’t it? No call to repentance... no hint as to why this was going to happen or who was going to ‘overthrow Nineveh!’ as the Hebrew literally says. And by the way, 40 is a number that is used many times in the Bible to indicate the completion of a specific task... and there are 40’s **everywhere** in the Bible (It rained 40 days and 40 nights in the Noah story... Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness, to name just 2 of the dozens of 40’s in the Bible) And you can be certain that Jonah, even if he was fearful of what might happen **to him** during the next 40 days in Nineveh, he was still happy to announce that this large city had just 40 days left until God completed his ‘specific task:’ destroying Nineveh!

But look at what we read in verse five! *The people of Nineveh believed God’s message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow.* This was the most unexpected response imaginable! How they knew to believe Jonah we aren’t told. We do know from history that a short time before Jonah’s arrival the Assyrian army had suffered a humiliating defeat, that Nineveh had just recently endured a rough time of famine and, probably most importantly, that there had just been a total eclipse of the sun, and a total eclipse of the sun was something that ancient people believed always signaled that something big, and usually unpleasant, was coming. It could be that all these things together had put the Ninevites on edge... they were already thinking that the god’s had something against them... so, it could very well be that Jonah’s message didn’t come as a total surprise. Of course, we can’t be 100% certain that any of these things influenced the Ninevites response to Jonah, but it’s clear they believed Jonah and they took immediate action! It’s also interesting that the word that the Ninevites use to speak of God here isn’t Jehovah... Jonah didn’t even mention Jehovah. The Ninevites used the name Elohim here, and Elohim was the name that the Assyrians used to speak of ‘The Great God who ruled over everything’ and that included all their ‘lesser’ gods. They

clearly felt that this warning was from the top... that the most important God of all was terribly upset with them for what their evil was doing to **his** world, and they needed to show **this** God they were seriously sorry for angering him... and burlap and fasting was their first response! Burlap, or what is also referred to as sack cloth, was cloth made of goat hair... it was itchy and uncomfortable, and people often wore it as a sign that they were in mourning... and this time they were in mourning over their past evil ways... and fasting was denying themselves food to show Elohim, the Great God who ruled over everything, that they were serious about putting things right! And the language here says clearly that everyone, literally everyone, not just many or just the religious elite, but **everyone**, responded with sackcloth and fasting to Jonah's message! Verse six goes even deeper into this response. '*When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes.*'⁷ *Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city: "No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all.*⁸ *People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence.*⁹ *Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.*' Jonah hadn't said a single word about anything but coming doom, and yet even the ruler over this great city, someone I'm certain wasn't in the habit of lowering himself in any way to anyone or anything, had a sense that an honest show of repentance might cause God to change his mind! Now, I am aware of all the things that scholars point out about this passage that they say proves this book was written long after the real prophet Jonah lived. They say there wasn't a king in Nineveh because Nineveh wasn't yet the capital of Assyria; and they say there is no record of animals in Assyria ever wearing sackcloth... that this was a Persian practice. And there is no record in the annals of ancient history of the Ninevites in mass ever repenting from their terrible wickedness. I know about all of this, and I can speak to these sorts of criticisms if you want to talk to me about them. But, again, the point of this passage, no matter when it was written, was to tell us that even those who we believe have absolutely no possibility of repenting from their wicked ways and honoring God, not only matter to God, but they may very well take us by surprise and turn to God. And the bottom line here is that the Ninevites **must** have profoundly repented of their evil ways because look at what verse 10 tells us! '*When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.*

Now, we have no idea how God had intended to 'overthrow' Nineveh... it may have been fire from above or an enemy from abroad. We don't know because it never happened. But what did happen was that Nineveh apparently, at least for a while, became a different place... it became the home of repentant, changed people and **that** certainly changed the world for some time! Now, to be honest, we are never told that they became followers of the God of Israel. But we do know that they began living in ways that pleased Jehovah, the God of Israel... pleased Him so much that he changed his mind and showed these once terribly wicked people profound grace!

Barry will get to Jonah's attitude about all this next week, but this chapter introduces something that most of the ancient Jewish people who first heard this story would have never expected: the evil Ninevites, of all people, when they heard God's warning from Jonah, direct and as ungracious as it was, repented and changed their ways... and if that wasn't enough of a surprise, God then responded to their repentance by graciously changing his mind and sparing the entire Ninevite population! This, by the way, is the 3rd time in this book that they would

have seen God delivering people that didn't seem to deserve God's graciousness. In chapter one **gentile** sailors, of all people, people most Jews at the time wouldn't have thought deserved God's concern at all, even if they did seem to be benevolent and kind gentiles, these gentiles were saved from a terrible storm by God! And then God saved the rebellious prophet Jonah from drowning as well! Jonah clearly preferred drowning over obeying God and going to Nineveh, but God had other plans and he graciously sent the big fish Jonah's way. And now we see God giving the wicked people of Nineveh an opportunity to repent from their evil ways... and when they repented, God graciously spared them from his planned destruction. And these truths would certainly have been chin scratchers for the first Jewish readers of this story. What they were used to hearing were stories of God dealing harshly with their enemies... they had the story of Sodom and Gomorrah... they had the stories from the exodus from Egypt... they even had the stories of their great king David's miraculous victories over the evil Philistines and in all these stories the Jewish people saw what they really wanted to see: God entering the world and destroying their enemies! Never once in any of these stories did God change his mind due to evil people repenting! And I can picture a group of ancient Jewish people sitting around a campfire having just listened to this part of Jonah's story and after a time of silence someone saying, 'So you're telling me that our God cares about people like the *Ninevites*?' And then I can hear someone else saying, 'I can't help but think about how many times our people have been warned by God's prophets to repent from their wicked ways and ignored God's warnings. This a new one!' I'm certain this story raised eyebrows back then and it still can.

This chapter brought me to a place of sober reflection. It has forced me to think about my own attitudes toward those that I feel have slighted me... or taken advantage of me... or treated me with obvious disdain and disregard. I suppose it may be hard to imagine that pastors, people who've signed up for difficult work, would have skin so thin that they'd be hurt by times of being slighted or taken advantage of or treated with condescension, but it happens... and while it doesn't make me think of these people as enemies, per se... it can make me less than interested, when I run into them at Kroger, in their, shall I say, flourishing. The Ninevites' turn around forces me to rethink my hard-heartedness towards others that I'd rather not care about... it reminds me, first of all, of the compassionate nature of our God... the God who, as Peter in his second letter to the church, so clearly tells us, is a Lord who *isn't really being slow in the way he deals with the evil in the world... No, he is being patient because he doesn't want anyone to be destroyed but wants everyone to repent*. This tells me that I should never discount **anyone's** importance to God or the possibility that anyone might repent! And secondly, this Ninevite turn-around reminds me of the teachings of Jesus when he said, "*Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked.*"³⁶ *You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.* (*Luke 6:35-36*). Jonah chapter 3 reminds me in spades that I must never condescend to anyone... anyone. Even those who **are** my enemies deserve compassion from me... compassion that mirrors God's compassion towards me... to be honest, there have been many times God has sent a 'big fish' my way when I didn't deserve it. And thirdly, this chapter makes me think long and hard about my willingness to do any of this loving and showing of compassion. These are difficult commands... And just like Jonah, I have to decide whether I am going to obey this call... am I going to show love to my 'enemies' and pray that in their repentance they will flourish? Chapter 3 tells me I need to do some chin scratching of my own...

This isn't, as I am often known to say, spiritual rocket science. The issues the Book of Jonah brings up force us to be brutally honest with ourselves... it forces us to ask very basic questions like, 'What is my capacity to love those who I believe are my enemies?' especially in our world which is so divided. It seems that we've come to a place where people seem unwilling to show anything but contempt towards those who disagree with them... on just about anything! People are making enemies everywhere! This chapter asks us, 'How deeply do we honestly want to see repentance in those that we would rather see 'overwhelmed?'' I know this is a very stark example, but I recently talked to an older woman who told me that her greatest disappointment in life was the late-in-life repentance of the woman who had stolen her husband from her years earlier. She told me that the one thing that had given her hope was knowing that that woman wouldn't be in eternity with her and now she knew she would have to deal with this other woman forever. I don't know the pain of what happened to her those many years ago, but I also don't want to bear the weight of that kind of bitterness either. And yet I am certain that it is everywhere in the hearts of those all around us... even some in this room. My prayer is that we will do the hardest of things... that we will turn from our natural inclinations and love like Jesus... that we will obey the call of the great God Elohim on our lives and allow him to change our hearts... and in changing our hearts, change the world.