

The Message: The deep mercy of God

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[0 : 00] Let us pray one more time and then let's hear from God. Heavenly Father, your word can shake a city, it can shake nations, it can shake hardened hearts, and it can also calm and comfort and bring hope to hurting hearts, hearts that are afraid.

And so as we come to this portion of your word today, we pray, Father, that it will do its transforming work and cause us to joyfully run to you today. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. America is the land of the second chance, and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life. That is a quote not from the current American president, but a former one, George W. Bush, in his State of the Union address all the way back in 2004.

President Bush was proposing the establishment of a program to help newly released prisoners reintegrate into society without re-offending.

And this, he said, was important because America is the land of second chances, even for prisoners. And today I want to suggest that our Christian faith, our religion is the religion of second chances.

[1 : 32] In fact, if all you ever do is read through the first book of the Bible, Genesis, already you will find that it is full of people being given second chances. Think of Adam and Eve, who are banished after sinning against God, but they are not executed.

And in fact, they leave the garden knowing that God has a plan to redeem humanity. In other words, there is a second chance. Or consider Noah.

Even as the world grew more and more wicked, God chose to preserve his family so that the world can be rebooted and not just destroyed. Or read through Joseph's story.

His brothers conspired against him, and yet when they unknowingly stood before him, years later, they will be given a second chance to show that they've changed.

Our religion is the religion of second chances. And all of us need to hear that, don't we? We know we need second chances.

[2 : 43] Because as we look over our lives, we all can think of moments where we failed to listen to God, moments we regret, we feel shame and angst, maybe even heartache over past sins and mistakes.

And perhaps today, some of us are particularly conscious of the need for a second chance. We feel the wake of the past, and we wonder, is there any hope?

Is a second chance truly available for me? Well, listen then to Jonah chapter 3. This, I think, is one of the clearest passages in the Bible that demonstrate our God is a God of second chances.

That is the first and perhaps most important thing I want to point out from this passage today. God is the God of second chances. How do I know that?

Well, why don't we just read the first two verses of Jonah chapter 3? Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.

[4 : 01] Now, does that sound familiar? If it doesn't, just turn back a page or two in your Bibles and read Jonah 1 verse 1 to 2. It is almost word for word the same.

It is almost as if we have hit the rewind button and we are watching episode 1 all over again. Now, do you remember how episode 1 played out?

Let me recap what we have seen so far. Back in chapter 1, we learn that Jonah is a prophet and a pretty successful one at that. But God called him and said, I have got a new assignment for you.

Speak not to your fellow Israelites, but to your nemesis, the Assyrians. But Jonah flat out disobeyed God and literally ran away from him.

He hated the idea of God's word going to his enemies and so he purposely gets on a ship heading in the exact opposite direction.

[5 : 07] But this is the God of the sea and the dry lands. So there is no way of escaping him. God stirs up a storm and gets him thrown into the sea before appointing another element of his creation, a big fish, to swallow him up.

And then, and only then does Jonah cry out to God. That's when he begins to see trying to get away from God is a mere dead end.

But even then, as Pastor Edward Sim hinted at towards the end of his sermon last week, Jonah hasn't quite turned the corner yet.

Notice last week, even in his cry, there is no sorry, there's no apology, no confession of his disobedience of any sort. And in fact, there remains some hints of moral superiority even in his prayers.

I am the one who sacrifices and make vows to you, he says in chapter 2, verse 8 and 9. Unlike those who cling to worthless idols.

[6 : 18] Now, is he not revising history just a little bit? Back in chapter 1, it was the opposite that happened. But God loves to give second chances even to prophets who have not fully learned their lesson yet.

And so the fish spits him out and we come to our passage in chapter 3. And it is like a do-over, a restart. The word of the Lord came to Jonah.

It's almost as if nothing has changed since God first called him to Nineveh. It is almost as if chapter 1, verse 3 to 2, verse 10 never happened.

It's as if God has chosen to forget all about Jonah running away. It is as if God has removed his transgression from him as far as the east is from the west.

God, you see, responds to his great sin with great mercy. He responds by giving him a second chance.

[7 : 31] And in fact, Jonah 3 is full of miracles like this. You know, so often we think of Jonah 2 as the great miracle of this book, don't we?

We hear about the fish swallowing up Jonah and we go, wow, that's amazing. But I think Jonah 3 has two greater miracles.

And this is the first of them. The miracle of God's endless patience with his defiant prophet. Think about it.

If God really wanted a prophet to go to Nineveh, he could easily have chosen another guy to go. He could have said, oh, well, Jonah has obviously disqualified himself.

Let's move on. What about Amos? But that's not what we see here. He comes back to Jonah. You see, what does it mean for God to be a giver of second chances?

[8 : 40] That's what I'm going to explore in the first half of this sermon from the opening few verses. Firstly, it means God never gives up.

You see, God isn't just committed to his mission. He is also committed to his missionaries. That is why he doesn't just move on from Jonah.

And that's why he doesn't just move on from us. when we fail him. Remember, God doesn't need Jonah.

But he pursued Jonah because he knows Jonah needs him. He knows Jonah needs him if he is to be the man God made him to be.

As the commentator Alec Mertier puts it, he perseveres with Jonah to bring him back, to redirect his cause, to make him the obedient man.

[9 : 45] And so God doesn't give up on us even when we don't seem to be fit for service. Jonah, of course, has just basically done all he can to get fired from the job, hasn't he?

The truth is, he has no true sympathy for the people his men to be reaching out to. He doesn't have the compassion of Christ. He would rather have died than pray the way Jesus did for his enemies. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. His values are not aligned with God. And so God has plenty of work to do in his heart.

But you know what? The Lord is still committed to his growth as he is committed to ours. In fact, the Lord is far more committed to our growth and our good than we are.

If we are honest, so often we have no clue about how or what we are doing, we have no idea how much we've actually sinned against God or how foolish we have been, how much work God still

really needs to do in our hearts.

[11 : 08] But God does know and yet he persists with us. God never gives up. So that is part of what it means for God to be the giver of second chances.

But there is more. You see, secondly, it also means God holds no grudges. Again, think about what Jonah has done.

If you are in charge of some project and you told one of the guys under you to do something and he deliberately does the opposite of what you've told him to do and he sabotages all your work, well, you'd be absolutely mad, weren't you?

And even if he comes back begging for forgiveness, you probably won't forget what he has done.

You'll be thinking, you've heard me, you owe me, I'm going to hold this against you.

But God does not hold grudges against people who humble themselves. Jonah 3 paints a striking picture, doesn't it?

[12 : 22] There aren't many opportunities for a second chance in our world today. imagine if someone dug up some careless words that you posted on social media ten years ago, just to hold it against you, to make it go viral and say, see, you're unworthy, you're unqualified, you're totally undeserving.

That's how the world often operates. But God holds no grudges. He says nothing to Jonah about his past transgressions.

He doesn't count it against him. And God doesn't change. Think of Peter meeting Jesus for the first time after the resurrection.

Think of all that Jesus could have said. What in the world were you thinking betraying me like that? What kind of rubbish follower are you?

But instead, Jesus simply says to Peter, feed my lambs. God is the wonder of the gospel.

[13 : 41] But here is the good news. We are also Christians. We have been given the gospel. And here is the wonder of the gospel.

God doesn't count my sin against me because God counts my sin against Christ who voluntarily bore my sin upon himself.

His mercies are new every morning. Hear that again. His mercies are new every morning, every single day we are trusting in Jesus.

But thirdly, for God to be the giver of second chances means he makes no deals. You see, even as Jonah is being forgiven, he is being recommissioned.

And God doesn't negotiate. Jonah still has the same task, verse 2. Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.

[15 : 00] A more literal translation would be speak to Nineveh the words I speak to you. In other words, Jonah say only what God tells you to say.

You can't adjust the message. And go where I tell you to go. You can't change your destination. You see, even though God has given Jonah a second chance, grace, that doesn't mean he will make life easier for him, does it?

No, just because God shows grace doesn't mean he reduces his demand on us. He still requires obedience.

And so Jonah has a choice, just like back in chapter 1. will he go to that great city of Nineveh, that great city which has 120,000 people in it?

That's what chapter 4 tells us. That great city filled with violence and evil and brutality, will he go and be God's prophet?

[16 : 14] Because fourthly, when we say God is the God of second chances, we mean he gives second chances to all, not just some. You see, God isn't just giving Jonah a second chance.

He still wants to do the same for Nineveh, that evil city that hasn't changed from Jonah 1. But why? Why does God still want to send Jonah? look at verse 3. There we are told that Nineveh was a very large city, which is of course true.

But actually, the more literal translation is that Nineveh was a great city to God. That's how the Hebrew puts it. In other words, the text is not just stressing the size of the city, but its significance.

This city was important to God. It might not have been great at all to Jonah, but to God, this city was a prime concern of his.

[17 : 30] He cares just as much about the people in it, evil as they are, as he does about Jonah. You see, God's mercy doesn't discriminate.

He really is, as Jonah will say next week in chapter 4, verse 2, a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

And the truth is, God cares about even the most godless and sinful places you can think of. The drug dealers and the criminal gangs and the greedy corporations and the palaces of dictators.

He is a God of deep, deep mercy. And he shows Jonah mercy, in part because he wants to grow this very same quality in him, so that he too may have mercy on others.

And because God is so concerned with this city, he wants his word to go out to it. That is the fifth thing it means for God to be the giver of second chances.

[18 : 52] It means he cares too much to remain silent. In verse 4, we are told what Jonah proclaims, and it must be the world's shortest sermon, isn't it?

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Just eight words in the English and in fact just five in the Hebrew.

Now to be fair, Jonah probably said more than that, but in verse 4 we are given its essence. God is God of the entire universe.

He sees what you're doing, and if you don't turn from your sin, you'll be judged. That's the essence of his message. And maybe you might think, oh pastor, you've been telling me how good and merciful God is, but that doesn't sound very loving, does it?

But you'll be wrong. You see, God is not ignorant. He can see how Nineveh lives. He sees all the evil stuff that is going on. And he also knows what's going on in places like Gaza, and Myanmar, and Syria.

[20 : 07] And he also knows what's going on in your homes and my home, your hearts, and my heart. He knows all the wrong ways that we've lived our lives, how that so often means that we end up hurting ourselves and others.

God is not ignorant, and therefore, he is not indifferent. He cares. He takes an interest.

He doesn't want sin to keep deforming us and his world. And because he cares, he warns.

Imagine if you knew for certain that a huge forest fire was coming, and it would definitely hit your friend's house in 40 hours.

You would definitely make sure to tell him to get out of there, wouldn't you? You would give a warning with the intention that he will heed your warning and take action.

[21 : 14] You say what you say because you want to protect him from danger. And that is exactly what God is doing here. He doesn't stay silent.

He sends his word through his prophet. Nineveh, he says, you still have time. You have 40 days. So take action. Repent. And so the Lord, as Peter will say in the New Testament, is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. And perhaps today, he could be speaking to you in particular.

Are you living your lives in such a way that God actually needs to send you a warning today in this very service? God cannot tolerate sin.

[22 : 27] Remember that. God cannot do it. And he cares when you get entangled in sin. And right now, he is patient with you, not wanting you to perish, but to come to repentance.

silence. And that's why he's saying to you, stop it now, whatever it is you're doing wrong. Do it before your life is overturned and overthrown.

Because he sees and he cares. So he doesn't stay silent. He is speaking and warning you and me right now.

That's our God. He doesn't give up. He holds no grudges. He doesn't make deals, but instead gives second chances to all.

And so he doesn't stay silent, but sends forth his word. But how then should we respond? How do we make the most of the gift of a second chance?

[23 : 38] That's what we look at for the remainder of our time. Let's rejoin the story and I want you to picture what is going on. Jonah is going to a great city.

It must have been intimidating. We're talking about a place with 1,500 towers and walls about 100 feet high. It is a picture of strength.

Just imagine if you are a Ukrainian today, walking into Moscow, people, then imagine if you then cry out, Vladimir Putin, watch out, in 40 days, you'll be dead.

Now, I don't think that will go too well with it. But here is the second miracle of this passage.

Remember, I said earlier that I think there are two great miracles in Jonah chapter 3?

Well, here's the other one, verse 5. The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

[24 : 45] This city full of God-haters turned back to God. The whole nation fell on its knees. What a sight that must have been. And as a side note, this picture of Nineveh believing is such a rebuke to our unbelief, isn't it?

I don't know about you, but so often, I just cannot picture how certain people will ever come to Christ. I look at that person and I say, oh, he's not religious at all, or he's too devoted to that other religion, or the way he lives, he's just too far gone.

And so I shut up. I doubt God's word has the power to change anything. But Jonah 3 shows us differently, doesn't it?

We think what people need is some great sign and wonder, or some self-proclaimed apostle to change lives, but it is the word of God come with the power of the spirit that brings true relief and reform and transformation.

It exposes us and points out to us where we've gone wrong, but it then brings healing and recovery as it tells us about the God of the gospel, the God who doesn't give up and holds no grudges and who is in supreme control throughout.

[26 : 14] It drills into our hearts and minds and soul and our misdeeds and our hurts and our history, all in order to bring God's goodness to it.

You see, do you want national revival? With five words in the Hebrew, Jonah brought it about by speaking the word of the Lord as it has been given.

Is this not where our confidence should lie? And as he speaks, the Ninevites make the most of their second chance.

It's quite interesting how verse five phrases it, isn't it? They believe God. They heard Jonah, but they believe God.

Put another way, they received the words of this man as the word from God. Like how the Thessalonian Christians received the words of Paul as the word from God centuries later.

[27 : 28] They were quick to soften their hearts, not waiting until the fortieth day before letting these words sink in, and they were quick to let those words shape their actions.

And that is not just the common man, but the king as well. Look at verse six. What does he do when he hears the word? When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down in the dust.

It seems as if he didn't meet Jonah personally, but as soon as God's word reaches his ears, he does exactly the same as the people. He lowers himself to be exactly the same level as the general population.

His external status doesn't matter to him anymore because what is obvious to the king is not that he is royalty, but he's a sinner, just like everyone else.

So like everyone else, he fasted and put on sackcloth, actions that Jonah would have understood, for that was a common sign of repentance in Israel.

[28 : 43] God's second chance. Whenever we hear God's word and are convicted by it, we must repent.

Notice how it occurs. There is a change at the level of the mind and the heart. The Ninevites believe God, they trusted what he said is true, and so they humbled themselves.

Then there is a change in action. They put on sackcloth with the king even sitting in the dust. For that is what repentance is, a change of mind and heart leading to a change in actions and life.

life. And just in case we are not sure that there really is a change in life, notice what the king decrees in verse 8. Let everyone call urgently on God, let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

They are to put an end to their violent acts. They are to go in the opposite direction of what they have done before. That's the heart of repentance.

[29 : 59] It is to do as the king does here, to give up control, to give up our throne and say, there is a higher throne to whom I now bow the knee.

And notice not just the depth but the breadth of the response. It is verse 5 from the greatest to the least and verse 8 extends even to the animals.

Now we might scratch our heads and laugh a little at that detail of animals dressed in sackcloth, but basically it captures how serious the king is, doesn't it?

Verse 6 reinforces this. To let the animals go hungry is to put the economy at risk, but the king says there are higher priorities to pay attention to at the moment.

after all, he didn't dare presume what God would or would not do. Verse 9, who knows, God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.

[31 : 13] He doesn't know how God will react. But here's the good news. God is the God of second chances.

He is a deeply merciful God and his character never ever changes. And precisely because his character doesn't change, God decides not to bring about judgment.

Verse 10, when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

as he always intended. It's what he says elsewhere in Jeremiah 18, verse 7-8, on the screen. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warn repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. You see, no matter what you've done, no matter how messy your history is, no matter how much of a loser you feel you are, or the world says you are, God can still step in and change the trajectory of your life.

[32 : 37] All he wants you to do is to truly admit your wrongs, truly humble yourself before him, truly turn to him, and rather than presuming, cast yourself on his mercy and say, you're in charge.

You decide. If you are not a Christian here this morning, know that this is the essential invitation of the gospel. It is to admit, like the king, we have failed God and push him away and it is to cast yourself on his mercy.

But here is one difference between us and the king. The king asks, who knows? Who knows if God will relent if we truly repent?

He really doesn't know. But we do. In fact, we can see hints of it in the Jonah story itself.

Now, think about it. How is it the Ninevites come to be safe? It is through a Hebrew man, a Jew, isn't it, who goes to the realm of the dead for three days and then comes back to life?

[34 : 03] It is by responding with faith and repentance to the news that he proclaims. Jesus. And we know someone like Jonah, who at the same time is a better Jonah.

We know for sure that if we come to Jesus, the one Hebrew man who never disobeyed God, the greater prophet who reveals God's perfect word, the sinless man who nevertheless died and rose again so that we can be justified, God will relent.

So if you're not a Christian, know this, and even if you're a Christian, if you know Jesus, believe in him, trust in his death and resurrection to cover all your sins, then this is the language the Bible uses of you.

You have been reborn, you have been regenerated, you have been renewed, and that prefix re- is really all about second chances, isn't it?

It's all about the opportunity to start all over again. Well, that's what you have been granted. But what about if we call ourselves Christians already and we think all is fine and dandy?

[35 : 39] What if we count ourselves as one of God's people? Then I think Jonah 3 has a slightly different message for us. You see, one of the things I always teach in classes on interpreting the Bible is for us to ask this question.

Why did the author write down this passage? What was he seeking to communicate to his original readers? And I want you to remember the historical context which I mentioned two weeks ago.

Do you remember what Israel is like during Jonah's time? It was the time of King Jeroboam and they were doing well. They were prosperous.

But the one thing they have not done is precisely what the Ninevites have done. they have yet to repent.

Their king has yet to repent. And God has sent them not just one prophet but many prophets. And he has been warning them judgment is coming.

[36 : 43] No change and Israel will be overthrown. So this passage is not just meant to reassure us but to challenge us.

You see, if God cares so much about Nineveh, those who are not yet called his people, how much more must he care about those who do call themselves his people?

How much more does he want them to repent? But here is the warning. If we think, oh, we're Christians, we're God's people, things are looking good, we have God's blessing, therefore it's okay to carry on as we are, giving him lip service, but in reality, ignoring him in our lives, we'll be in big trouble.

That is exactly the message Jesus brings to the Pharisees. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees come demanding a sign from Jesus to prove that he really is who he claims to be.

And in response, Jesus says this, Matthew 12, verse 39-41, on the screen. He answered, a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

[38 : 03] For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, In other words, Jesus is saying this, look at Nineveh.

They only heard Jonah preaching and they repented. But what about you guys? You've had someone greater than Jonah, you've had the Lord himself preaching to you and you're refusing to repent.

And if that's what you keep doing, you will receive condemnation. That was Jesus' message for the Pharisees and it is the same message for us today.

The people of Nineveh are to be our role models here. But if we don't follow their example, they become our judges. So which of this will it be?

Will we presume, fail to examine ourselves and fall into condemnation? Or will we be willing to let the Holy Spirit shine his light into our lives and ask him to change us when necessary?

[39 : 29] Will we allow him to bring about a change in our minds and our hearts, leading to a change in action and in life?

love? And here is one final implication. The king of Nineveh asks, who knows?

But actually, someone in the story does know. It's Jonah. As we'll see next week in chapter 4, he knows full well that God is a God of deep, deep mercy.

And because he knows, that's why God wants him to tell. And it is his obedience in this chapter that leads to the salvation of Nineveh.

God And my brothers and sisters, today, we too know, we have a powerful message, a message that can change an entire city, that can change Kuching, and bring about the most sweeping social reforms possible.

[40 : 45] We know. So shall we let others know too? Let's pray. Father, your word is living and active.

It is powerful, and I pray that today, your word will do what you have sent it forth to do. I pray again that it will comfort and bring healing to those who know that they need a second chance, they need you, and I pray that you will bring reassurance to them, and for those of us who might need a bit of a kick up our backside, I pray that these words will challenge us also to turn from our idols and to turn to you, our living God.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.