



Sermon Growth Guide

May 5, 2024

Who Knows?



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Jonah's Errand – Who Knows?

Jonah 3:1-10

Key Verse: Jonah 3:9

“Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

Big Idea: Perhaps the greatest gift of God's grace is not our experience of it, but rather having the privilege of helping another encounter His grace.

Foundations

This Sunday, Jonah finally makes it to Nineveh. After encountering the grace of God in the belly of a great fish, he now experiences the grace of God at work in a great city. Jonah's Errand is almost complete as he delivers the message God gives him.

We read that the Ninevites from least to greatest believe God. Wow! Jonah is barely a day into his three-day task, and God's message is spreading like wildfire. The people are responsive.

“The people of Nineveh listened and trusted God” (Jonah 3:5a, The Message). Listen and trust. The people of Nineveh are able to do what Jonah has struggled to do so far: listen to and trust God.

As you read this passage together, try to envision what is happening. Picture 120,000 people. Picture Jonah walking through the city and preaching, “40 more days and Ninevah will be overthrown.”

Imagine people and animals in sackcloth and sitting down in the dirt. Picture the King of Nineveh doing the same and then writing his decree.

Understanding God's Word

Together, read Jonah 3.

What do you notice?
What do we learn about who God is?
What do we learn about God's heart?

Read Joel 2: 12-14.

What do you make of the similarities between the words of Joel and the King of Nineveh?

Applying God's Word

What does it look like for you to listen to and trust God?

How do you cultivate a responsive heart?

Do you resonate with Jonah's struggle to obey?

Witnessing God's Word

Take some time in silence to ask the Lord if there are one or two people he is asking you to move toward with God's grace and good news.

If you already picked up the Jonah's Errand tool in worship, share what you heard from God.

Close in prayer.

Open your Bibles to Jonah chapter 3. We are in the middle of the fantastic story of Jonah and the whale. Last week we ended with our disobedient prophet running from God, surviving three days in the belly of a great fish, vowing to do what God asks him to do, and then being spit up onto the beach alive and in one piece.

If we were in a musical production of Jonah, the curtain would have come down at the end of Jonah chapter 2 for an intermission. The audience needs to take a breath to process the whole ordeal. So, here we are, back in our seats, for Act two, chapter three. Maybe we will call it, “The re-do.” Or the “the do-over.” Or perhaps if you’re a golfer, “the mulligan.” Or for Taylor Swift fans, “Begin Again.”

Jonah Chapter 3 opens with these words: “Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” I’ll read it again: “Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.”

I’m going to pause here for those of you who simply need to hear this Word today—the word of the Lord comes to Jonah again. We learn something important about God in this first verse. The Lord doesn’t give up on us. God pursues us again and again. He is God of the second chance. Maybe that’s what you need to hear this morning: no matter what your response to God has been, he never stops chasing you with his goodness, mercy, his purpose for your life and his grace. In fact, chapter three opens and closes with a word of grace. And everything in between is pure grace. God’s unmerited grace surrounds our lives from start to finish and works on us in the in-between. Be encouraged.

We finally arrive at the great city of Nineveh and discover that as the curtain comes up for Act 2 our story becomes even more amazing than Act 1. The sailors turning to God in the storm on the boat in chapter 1 was mere prelude for what happens here: an entire city calls out to the Lord and experiences the grace of God.

Here’s what I am going to suggest today—perhaps the greatest gift of God’s grace is not our experience of it, but rather having the privilege of helping another encounter that grace. God’s grace is designed to be received and then handed off. And God knows (better than we do) who is ready to receive it next. And it can be the most unlikely of suspects. Perhaps an entire city! Here’s where I will lead us today: First, a brief word about Nineveh. Then two surprises we discover in the text. And, finally, an invitation.

Let’s talk about Nineveh. Nineveh sits in present day Iraq. Twice God calls Nineveh “great.” In chapter one and here in chapter two. What makes this city great? Well, it’s massive, vast, colossal. The author wants us to know how big it is. The text tells us it takes three days to travel across it.

The city’s circumference was estimated to be at least 7.5 miles, which is an extraordinary size for an ancient city. We learn that 120,000 people live there (chapter 4). Nineveh is a huge city for that time. The author takes the time in this chapter to highlight the enormity of Jonah’s task both in scope and potential resistance to the message. The text tells us that God sees Nineveh as both “great” and “wicked.” That is what marks them in God’s mind as worthy of a visit from a prophet of Israel. However, Jonah doesn’t see Nineveh as worthy at all of his time or his effort. But God is relentless in his pursuit of both Jonah and Nineveh. The gift of God’s grace is coming for both of them! Let’s see how the story further unfolds in this chapter.

Let’s look at two surprises in this chapter. There are likely more, but let’s start with these. Jonah has been chosen for this errand, and God will see it through come hell or highwater (literally). So, just for fun, let’s take a look at Jonah’s qualifications for this task. He runs away from the Lord and tries to hide. He boldly tells others that he is running from God. He falls asleep in crucial and dangerous moments. He’s rather drowsy than do what God wants. He’s full of feelings—he’s judgmental and angry and doesn’t really like

God (or at least God's assignments). He's not exactly the epitome of emotional and spiritual health. And maybe the final jewel in his resume: he enjoys plants more than people (see chapter 4). Jonah seems like a great choice for this job.

But, friends, God chooses who he chooses. And for some reason, God won't go to Nineveh without Jonah. It seems like a bad plan, but incarnation is God's way. God saves people so they can be sent. That journey can be pretty messy, but God always sends a person and usually that person is fairly flawed. (Except for one who will come hundreds of years after Jonah). Do you resonate with Jonah even a little?

I think it might be useful to be able to say from time to time, "I'm having a Jonah kind of day." And we would all know exactly what that means. I'm feeling self-centered and I don't want to be around people I don't like. I don't like that God loves the people I don't like. I'm not going to do what God is leading me to do today. End of story. If that's the case, it might be best to fully own it like Jonah did.

Maybe we don't need to force ourselves into what God wants for us, but rather start by simply owning where we are asking God for help. One of the beautiful things about Spring is that we get a visual tour each day around here of new life budding and sprouting. The things we thought were dead from the winter are coming back to life.

Here's a little Spring time prayer for us as we see all this beauty emerging around us: Lord, can you take what is dead inside me and cause it to come alive and grow again? Does anyone need that prayer this morning? Take heart! As we lean into this little prophetic book, we discover that God is able to accomplish new growth in the most unlikely places. Which leads us to Surprise number two.

Our second surprise is noticing the overwhelming responsiveness of this

non-Israelite nation to Jonah's visit. Did you notice how quickly the people respond? We are told that Jonah has only gone a day's journey in (one third of the way) and already the city is responding. We read that the Ninevites are believing God and beginning their journey of repentance. Word is spreading like wildfire. We know from the text that Jonah is speaking the message God gives him—maybe the shortest sermon ever given. "Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Not a feel-good sermon. And it's only seven words (In Hebrew—it's only four words). But God's Word spoken at God's direction to the people that God has prepared to hear it will accomplish its purpose.

And we read in chapter three, it's not just a few people who are responding, it's everyone. From greatest to least. As Eugene Petersen paraphrases in *The Message*: Everyone repented..."rich and poor, famous and obscure, leaders and followers." Right on up to the King himself. The King, we read, then makes repentance mandatory in a public proclamation.

"By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence."

It's probably helpful to say a word about the animals here too. Animals, herds and flocks are also participating in the fast and they are being dressed in burlap and sackcloth. Now I know some people like to dress their animals up, however, I'm guessing not in burlap. But it was Persian custom for animals to take part in ceremonies of mourning and grief as they were living things who would bear the suffering with the people. So, this addition adds a note of sincerity to Nineveh's repentance (Allen, p. 224).

If the response of the Ninevites to the prophetic call feels familiar, it is! Their pattern of repentance mirrors almost

exactly the repentance pattern of Israel when they were called back to the Lord and out of sin. They hear the Word of God and receive it. They repent through fasting and sackcloth. They turn to the Lord and change their ways. Here are the words and hopes of the King of Nineveh: "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (3:9). And here are the same words spoken by the prophet Joel (2:14) when he calls the people of Israel to repentance: "Who knows? God may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing..."

Is it possible that Jonah is getting a front row seat to see that all of humanity is created with the capacity to receive the grace of God, respond to the Word of God and seek repentance? Is God really on a world-wide mission to bring salvation to the ends of the earth? Could it be that Jonah's dramatic little story pulls back the curtain of God's heart for the world and shows us the lengths God will go to include us in his work in the world?

I suggest again: Perhaps the greatest gift of God's grace is not our experience of it, but rather having the privilege of helping another encounter that grace.

A few weeks ago, some of my college friends were in town. They got married right after college and have been missionaries in a highly sensitive place in the world for decades. This place is close to modern day Nineveh. They sensed a call to go and, using the skills and gifts they have, started a business there to teach English. Their language school has a great reputation locally and they share their life and work with the people there. It's a dangerous place to live, the climate is brutal, and they live in a posture of trust not knowing what the next day will hold. But as they shared stories with me, I was overwhelmed by their sense of joy and contentment in being used by God in beautiful ways. They know the language and customs, they follow the dress code, and they live day to day listening and trusting God. They are delighted to be

where God has them. God's call led them initially to a scary place, but they wouldn't want to be anywhere else. They love where God has sent them.

Most of us won't be called to modern day Nineveh, but if we are servants of Jesus, we should consider ourselves sent. We can assume that God is constantly whispering the names of people (maybe entire cities) in our path who are ready to receive the good news of Jesus. Wherever you are, and wherever you are going, God is sending you with purpose and love and his mission.

If we are quiet enough to let our hearts be open and listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, God will speak. I'm going to give a moment of quiet for us to simply ask God, "Who in my life are you sending me to today, this week? How are you inviting me to start praying for them?"

(Take a quiet moment for listening to the Lord.)

The Lord doesn't send us out without feeding us. We don't eat at the table of Jonah, we eat at the table of Jesus who without hesitation took on the call to come to us, to be with us, to die for us and to give us life. Amen!