

Text: Jonah 3

Theme: God of Second Chance

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during All Age Service on 21/02/2016 at 10.30am

Introduction

Nothing more clearly summarizes the true meaning of grace than the simple phrase found in Jonah 2:9, "Salvation is of the Lord." That statement is both striking and humorous because it comes from the world's worst missionary. At the beginning of the story, Jonah is running from God; at the end he is arguing with God; in between he is praying and preaching. This book is about God and how great his heart is toward prodigal sons and daughters who run away from him. God is mentioned 38 times in the book while the fish is mentioned 4 times, the city is mentioned 9 times and Jonah is mentioned 18 times.

Here is a lesson for all of us as we continue in our study of Jonah: Jonah is a type of Israel and we are so much like him that it's scary. There's a little Jonah in all of us and a whole lot of Jonah in most of us. That's why we need, not just grace, but outrageous grace.

With that as introduction, we proceed to Chapter 3 under 3 headings:

- 1. God gave Jonah a second chance;**
- 2. The people of Nineveh repented; and**
- 3. God's gracious response.**

1. God gave Jonah a second chance. Verses 1-2

What an amazing love God has for his wayward people? Jonah did everything he could to resist God but as soon as Jonah repented, God forgave him and recommissioned him. He was under no obligation to send Jonah again. He could have sent somebody else. The really encouraging truth here is that Jonah's disobedience hasn't cancelled the call. God's message is, "Go to Nineveh. And don't mess it up this time."

Note the crucial words "a second time." Jonah got a second chance. God always welcomes prodigals who make u turns and return home. The light is always on in the Father's house but Jonah did not know in the belly of the great fish what would happen if and when he got out.

What do we learn about God here? **God doesn't hold grudges.** He is the God who "abundantly pardons" sinners when they come to him. He demonstrated his grace by renewing his call on Jonah's life. **God doesn't negotiate when we rebel.** It's not as if God has said, "Okay, Jonah, I get it. You don't want to go to Nineveh so I want you to take my Word to Tarshish instead, since that's where you were going anyway." That's not how it works. God gives Jonah a second chance to do what he should have done the first time. **God doesn't give up.** He cares more for the worker than for the work. If all God cared about was Nineveh, he could have gotten someone else. But he wanted Jonah to confront the evil in his own heart and to see something of the great love inside God's heart. How much God wants Jonah to be like Him in loving Nineveh to the point of giving the city a warning of the danger and disaster ahead.

God doesn't need Jonah, but Jonah desperately needs God. And we can say more generally that God doesn't need us but we desperately need him. It takes a lifetime for most of us to grasp that truth.

Verse three

Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh. This is the only time in the book where Jonah obeys the Lord. Before and after this episode, Jonah has a stinky attitude, but at this point he

obeys God's call. As Jonah sets out for Nineveh, each step sets him on a collision course between his prejudice, Ninevite's arrogance, and the unlimited love of God. Jonah had to learn that you don't have to love Nineveh, but you do have to give God's message.

Nineveh was a city given over to greed, immorality, and bloodthirsty violence. The people knew nothing about the God of the Bible. And God said, "That great city" is still on my heart! If we have God's heart, we will care about the sinful cities too. We will care about people who are different to us in creed, colour, tastes, class, etc. Our God has a heart bigger than all our "reasonable" calculations. He loves the city and his heart goes out to those who want nothing to do with him.

So Jonah ends up in Nineveh. The text says that it took three days to go through it. That might mean that it took three days to walk through every part or it might mean that it took three days to walk all the way around it.

So Jonah goes and begins to preach in this pagan city. His message is very simple. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (v. 4). That was his whole message. It's eight words in English; only 4 words in Hebrew. A pretty depressing message if you ask me.

None of this "God loves Nineveh" or "Nineveh for Jesus" or "Say Yes Nineveh."
A message of impending judgment and nothing more. (God's method requires no advance team or an elaborate committee; no Facebook page...; no purchase of TV time...; no raising of funds...) Jonah just went to Nineveh and gave his entirely negative 8-word sermon.

By the way, why do you suppose Jonah focused on the coming judgment? Because that's all he cared about. He hoped Nineveh would be destroyed, and he would be happy if it happened in forty days. Say what you will, no one could ever accuse Jonah of being a preacher of "cheap grace." He was a hard-nosed preacher of God's judgment who would be happy to see it come true forty days down the line.

When you stand back and think about it, this doesn't seem like a very promising evangelistic approach. But underlying it was a truth that Jonah himself did not understand. Nineveh was ripe for awakening but no one knew it. Jonah didn't know it. Nineveh didn't know it. But God knew it. And His Spirit will accomplish it.

2. The people of Nineveh repented (Read verses 5-9).

Notice what happened when Jonah preached: **The Ninevites believed God (v. 5).**

It doesn't say they believed Jonah, though that was also true. It says they believed God, thus revealing the genuine nature of their faith. Lest we doubt this, consider the last half of **verse 5**: A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

The king stood up (a sign of his serious intent), removed his royal robes (a sign of humility), covered himself with sackcloth (a sign of mourning), and sat in the dust (a sign of repentance). He then sends out a call for a time of fasting and prayer, because as he says, "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (Jonah 3:9).

That is radical repentance. Although the word "repentance" is not in this passage, you can see it written all over the actions of the people. You see, repentance is not really much about how you feel as to what you do. Yes, you should feel terrible and remorseful about your sins but repentance is something more than that. Repentance is based on agreeing with what God has said in a particular situation. That's what Jonah did. He acknowledged God and His Word and he had a change of heart (**Jonah 2:9b**). **You cannot repent without believing God and His Word. Repentance goes with faithful proclamation of the Word of God and faithful believing.**

For the Ninevites, it is not Business as usual. Something changed. You can say sorry without being sorry. When I watch our grandchildren and on occasions when the big brother does offend her sister and he is told to say sorry, he can say "sorry" in a way you know he does not mean it, but has fulfilled all obligations. Or when as an adult, you allowed your mouth to run wild in a situation and God convicts you and you end up confessing to God but you add, "but you know God, that Dele is an impossible person to relate to." When there is a "but" or a tinge of excuse, you have not repented. Repentance and excuses do not go together.

Repentance is the very process of turning to God and turning your back to your old way. If God wants you to go to Liverpool, and previously you were in London, to believe God means leaving London and heading for Liverpool. You cannot remain in London and say you believe God. That is what repentance entails. It cannot be business as usual. The status quo must change. Jesus tells the story of son who takes his inheritance from his father and runs away. He spends his money on parties and prostitutes, but when the money runs out (and so do his friends), he comes to himself and returns to his father where he says "Father I have sinned against heaven and against you." His offence was not just against his family, but also against God. The confession that is the beginning of repentance is not just recognizing that our bad behaviour hurts other people, or hurts ourselves; it is a recognition that our bad behaviour hurts God.

Someone could have challenged Jonah and say "who are you to come and preach to us when you are a runaway prophet and we know everything about the boat thing, the throwing into the sea thing, and the fish thing! I am sure Jonah would retort that "that is all the more reason you should listen to me because I have been there".

The mighty king of Nineveh gets it. He knows they are guilty. He reckoned on the mercy of Almighty God. He doesn't know for sure. But he thinks God may yet have mercy on Nineveh. Though I'm sure he had never heard these words, it's as if he has memorized **Isaiah 55:6-7**. "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way... and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

Nineveh teaches us about regret for our sins. We are the "instant society," and we have become too familiar with the grace of God. I think that if we recognized the offence that our sins cause God, we too might learn to fast and mourn. In our "repentance" we can often times be concerned more with stopping feeling bad, rather than understanding the offence of our sins. Nicky Gumbel tells us of a man who sent a cheque to the government for back taxes with a note attached that said, "I felt so guilty for cheating on my taxes I had to send you this cheque. If I don't feel any better, I'll send you the rest."

Billy Graham never saw anything like this. Think about that. A whole pagan city believed in God.

*It's like saying . . . Everyone in London got right with God, or
Everyone in North Korea turned to the Lord, or
Everyone in Saudi Arabia got on their knees and became Christians.*

It's phenomenal, unbelievable, incredible. And yet it happened.

What are the chances of that happening? Without God, the chances are zero. Why did this happen? Not because of Jonah. He didn't even want to be there. How could this happen in a pagan city like Nineveh? It happened because of the two greatest words in the Bible: "But God!"

You never know what God will do. You never know who he will touch next. Nineveh was ripe for revival. They just didn't know it. But God did.

That leads me to an important principle. **Small obedience always beats great intentions.** Sometimes we put aside the small things because we intend to do something great "someday." We dream about what we will do when we have more time or more money or when we aren't so busy or when the kids are out of school or when we get a promotion or when we're called to a different church or when we get a better job. We all have big plans that we dream about, don't we? Nothing wrong with big plans. **But small obedience beats big plans every time. We can dream so much about tomorrow that we neglect to do the small things we ought to do today.**

3. God's Gracious Response (v. 10).

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. Sometimes we stumble over this because some older translations say that God "repented." A better word would be "relented." God always intended to show mercy once the people turned from their evil ways. How much faith does it take to be saved? Not too much, as long as your faith is in the right object.

We will be held accountable for what we have done with the opportunities God has given us. It is the responsibility of each generation to reach their generation for Christ. Have we stopped believing that God can reach the unreachable? Have we stopped believing that God can do the impossible? Do we look around us and see how bad things are and say, "It's Nineveh. It's hopeless"?

God loves Nineveh! Remember, Jesus touches the untouchable. Jesus reaches the unreachable. Jesus can save Nineveh.

What will become of the reluctant prophet who doesn't love the world God loves? Stay tuned. There is one more chapter in Jonah's amazing story.

Prayer

Give us your heart for this world, especially for the great cities of the world. May we not fail in the task of reaching our generation for Jesus.