

Called to the Light

I. The Law Shows Our Sin

Of all the stories in the Bible, I think that Jonah is one that we all are most familiar with. God calls the prophet Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and proclaim his judgment, and Jonah refuses. Instead, he tries to run as far away as he can, but even then he could not escape this calling from God. A storm hits the boat he is traveling on, and Jonah knows why. It was his fault, and so he needed to fix things. He had the sailors throw him over the side of the boat, and as soon as that happened, the storm was calmed. God did not forget his chosen prophet, and sent a large fish to swallow him whole. For three days, Jonah sat in its belly, praying to God for relief. And on the third day, that fish spat up Jonah on the shore, safe and sound. It is here that our lesson from Jonah picks up.

Have you ever wondered why Jonah so vehemently denied God's call to go and preach to the Ninevites? Why did he have such hatred in his heart against them? The Ninevites belonged to the nation of Assyria. This was a nation that was well known to all those who lived near it, but for all the wrong reasons. The Assyrian nation was a militaristic one, and its main goal in wartime (and often in peace as well) was to terrorize its enemies. They often tortured and murdered those that they defeated in battle in gruesome and terrible ways. They were a nation to be feared, but on top of all of this, Nineveh itself was a thriving hub of sin. Like Las Vegas here in the U.S., many have called Nineveh the "Sin City" of its day. Sin, and all of its ugly actions and consequences, thrived in Ancient Nineveh.

It really comes as no surprise that God declared to this city through Jonah, "**Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed.**" (vs. 4) After all, everything that this nation stood for, and that this city represented, all stood in opposition to the holiness and perfection of God. You know what may be more shocking? God says something similar to all sinners. "**The wages of sin is death.**" (Rom. 6:23) Now you may think to yourself, "That's not fair of God! Why should I be given the same judgment of death, when I haven't done anything as terrible as any of those Assyrians? Why should I be condemned to destruction for something so little?" In God's eyes, all sin is equal, no matter how "big" or how "small" we may think it is. Any sin that we commit, even something as small as a hateful thought or an angry word to another, is damning. What's even worse, we were born into sin. There's no escaping it, because by nature, we are all sinful! We are all born deserving only death and destruction, and eternal condemnation to hell!

The world will claim, "Well then, God isn't fair! He condemns people without them ever knowing the rules that he has laid out!" But that's just not true. God has made it plain for all to see. All they need to do is listen to their conscience. Better yet, open up his Word, the Bible! Thank God, then, that he has revealed this to us. Thank God, that he has made sin plain, for all to know and understand. Thank God that he has provided each of us with pastors and teachers and fellow Christians who have explained this law to us, and made plain what God thinks about sin! Thank God, that he has not left us to stumble around, blind to what sin is. Thank God, that he has sent us all our own Jonah, to proclaim his Word for us all!

II. God Has relented because of Faith in Jesus

But that's not all that we can thank God for this morning. There's one other very important thing that we can thank and praise him for every day of our lives! He did not destroy us all because of the sin that we were born with. Just as he did for the people of Nineveh, he has warned us of the consequences of sin through his Word. And through this, he has put his grace, the undeserved love that he has for all, on display! Think about that for a moment. There were two options that God could have taken in his decision about over Nineveh. He could have judged them and destroyed them without any warning. He certainly has the power to do so! But that's not what he did. Instead, he sent Jonah to warn the people, and call them to repentance. Even with such sinful city like Nineveh, God showed them (and us as well) that he truly does desire that ALL are saved, even those whom we'd consider "unsaveable."

And what was the result of Jonah's preaching of the law? **“The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth... 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.”** (vs. 5, 10) The Ninevites were shown the seriousness of their sin. They were shown just how badly they needed to be saved from God's judgment. They believed what God said to them, and for that, God relented. He did not destroy the city, but instead turned from his anger and saved them!

God has done the same for all of us! As we read through the Bible, we hear God's law, and all of the requirements he lays out for a perfect life. As we do so, we also realize that we have failed to keep those laws perfectly. That guilt can be overwhelming, because we knew there was nothing to do to save ourselves. The law opens our eyes to see just how desperately we needed saving. And in that guilt, God revealed his grace to us. He did not leave us to wallow in guilt and self-pity. He has not condemned without any hope for salvation. Instead, he points us all to Jesus, our revealed Savior, and simply tells us, “Believe in him!” Jesus was punished in our place. Jesus took the condemnation and judgment meant for us and our sins, and placed that on his shoulders instead. Through faith in his sacrifice on the cross, God pours out his grace on us, reassuring us that we no longer stand condemned before him. We no longer need to fear any sort of judgment, because Jesus took it all on himself! All our sins, no matter how great or how small we think they are, have all been forgiven! God remembers them no more. When he looks at each of us, he no longer sees the sins that we commit. Instead, he sees the perfection of Jesus. He sees his own dearly loved child!

You are perfect. You are holy, and innocent. You are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. Isn't that such a wonderful thing to know! Doesn't that just lift a huge burden off of your shoulders? You do not need to worry about pleasing God, hoping to be spared from his wrath through your own actions. Instead, you are free to serve and love him in everything that you say and do! This realization that comes by faith changes our lives, just as it did for the Ninevites. Now you probably won't have the desire to go home and change into your sackcloth for a nice refreshing bout of fasting, but you know what you can do? You can live out your life of faith, motivated by the grace that God has shown to you through faith. You are able to be kind and generous to others. You can love others, not because of the goodness of your heart, but because of the love that God has shown to each of you!

But more than this, it's important that we all realize that there are other “Ninevites” who need to hear this message of condemnation and grace! There are tons of people out there who are without hope, or filled to the brim with guilt. There are many who have seen the effects of sin with their own eyes, and are in desperate need of hearing the gospel message! How can we know who needs to hear that? There's really only one way. By living out our faith. By speaking with and interacting with others. By taking the opportunities we are given to share the gospel message, and then praying to God that he uses our witness to change their hearts from stubborn rebellion in sin, to a life that is motivated by the love that he has for all.

So what have we learned about our Savior today? What have we gotten to know about him? Two very important things. First, he hates sin, and condemns it all fairly and equally. But he also forgives, and does so freely, through faith in his sacrifice on the cross. Trust in that promise! Let it be the motivation for all that you say and do, as you serve your loving Savior in joy and humility! Amen.