

Jonah 3

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[0 : 0 0] I don't know if you ever play those kind of word association games. So you say a word and you have to say what comes into your mind. So if I said to you Scotland, I wonder what! come into your mind. Rain? Possibly. Cold weather? Possibly. A rugby team who fought valiantly on Saturday but still lost. Try another word. God. What comes into your mind when you hear the word God? Many people have different reactions. I was chatting to my neighbour a couple of weeks, or last week. In fact it was this day last week. And for him, religion is just unnecessary.

Why do I want to have religion? God is irrelevant. And he then said, well doesn't God say things like, if you obey me, then you can have eternal life? Well that just sounds selfish and petty. So words like selfish and petty come into Paul's mind when he thinks of God. Others of course go further. Richard Dawkins and the New Atheists, they describe God as fictional for a start, but as a capricious, mean, malevolent bully. Some people do have that idea, don't they? Or for others, maybe people think of God as a kind of cuddly grandfather, giving you little sweets every now and again to keep you happy and generally being nice. Mum and Dad do the tough discipline, Grandad, he's the softie you can look to. Or others perhaps have a view of God as a kind of stern headmaster. All right if you're on the right side of him, but if you step out of line you could be in trouble. I think that's perhaps the idea I had growing up. I don't know where I got it from, because it's certainly not what my parents taught me, but something about life seemed to give me that impression. But as we look at this story in Jonah chapter three, this real story, something that happened, I want us to think, what does it tell me about

God? What is this God of the Bible like? As we walk through the story, we're going to see four things about this God in all. The first one of them is there in verse one. The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time. The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time. He is a God who gives second chances. He's a God who gives second chances. When you think about this, what had Jonah done to possibly deserve a second chance? God had said, go to Nineveh, he'd gone in the opposite direction to Tarshish. All through chapter one, he'd been completely hopeless and useless. The pagan sailors were calling out to God. Jonah had hidden himself down below the depths. The pagan sailors had been concerned about Jonah's life. Jonah hadn't been concerned about himself. He didn't even seem terribly worried about the sailors' lives. Yet despite Jonah's defiance and disobedience, God gives him a second chance. Yeah, when my children do things that deliberately defy mummy and daddy, they know they're in trouble. It's a firm boundary there. If you do exactly the opposite of what I've just told you, there will be big consequences. Now, we love them, so they do get more chances as well. But notice, what does God say to Jonah? All he says is, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out to it, it should be, the message that I tell you. No recriminations. No, Jonah, don't want you to do what you did last time. No, Jonah, if you do that again, I'm not going to send away all next time. No, Jonah, I want to make sure you're really sorry before I use you again.

He says, the God who gives second chances. He forgets Jonah's rebellion. How good are we at forgiving and forgetting? Sometimes we can forgive, can't we, but we're often not very good at forgetting. Somewhere in our minds, we always remember what he did to me, what she said to me. Here is this God who gives second chances. He doesn't bring anything back again. And this is not just the way he treats Jonah. It's the way he acts consistently through the Bible. Some of you may know the story of Samson, a man who God has supremely gifted, and yet a man who had thrown it all back in God's face, just as Jonah did. And yet as Samson is imprisoned, ready to die, he prays. And God hears his prayer. He gives Samson's second chance. And Samson does more to fulfill the mission God gave him in his dying act, pushing down a temple that he did in the rest of his life. Or think about Peter. And Peter had denied knowing Jesus. Denied knowing Jesus three times. Yet

what does Jesus do after the resurrection? Goes for a walk with Peter, especially reinstates him and recommissions him. The God of the Bible, the one true God, is a God who gives second chances. I don't know about you, but I know I need those second chances. Not just second or third or fourth, but thousands and thousands of chances. But he's a God who gives them. There's also a second chance for Jonah. There's a second chance for Nineveh as well. God wants this message to get to Nineveh.

[5 : 13] So the fact that Jonah had gone in the wrong direction last time does not stop God's determination to get his message to Nineveh. They have a second chance to hear it as well. And we can see a little echo of God's compassion for Nineveh. Compare chapter 1 verse 2 to chapter 3 verse 2. These are the two commands Jonah's given. So chapter 1 verse 2, he's told, Call out against Nineveh, for their evil has come before me. Whereas in chapter 3 verse 2, it says, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out, it says against it in our versions, in the original it actually says to it, rather than against it. Subtly different.

Call out to it the message that I tell you. The emphasis now is on Jonah to just obey what he's heard. There isn't mention at this point of Nineveh's evil. So this is a God who gives second chances. A second chance to Jonah, a second chance to Nineveh. He's also a God who gives severe warnings though. Look at the message he gives Jonah in verse 3.

Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey, and he called out, yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. See, God who gives severe warnings. There is judgment coming, Nineveh. There is judgment coming.

Now of course that's exactly why many people today hate the idea of God. It's why my neighbour Paul didn't like the idea. It's why Richard Dawkins calls God a malevolent bully. But think for a moment, who do we give severe warnings to? Is it to people we don't really know and don't care about? Or is it to those we really love? When we get out of our car in a car park, I say to my three-year-old son, Joel, hold my hand. This is a car park and it's dangerous.

Is that because I'm restricting him? Is that because I'm a bully? No, of course not. It's a loving warning. Because it's dangerous. And so here God gives the people of Nineveh a severe warning, but it comes out of love. That judgment is coming. Judgment is coming.

[7 : 31] And you can sense that love if you look at verse three again. Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. Now if you look down at the footnotes in your Bibles, I'll mention this as I read it.

It says the Hebrew, the original language, literally says a great city to God. And scholars debate whether that means, just a way of saying it's a really big city, or whether it means it was a great city to God. Whether it means what it says, that to God this was an important place. And I think it's probably the latter for a whole host of reasons. Not least that's the way God speaks about Nineveh when we get to chapter four, as we'll notice next week.

It is also quite a big city. It takes Jonah three days journey to go in and out of the city. Now that may mean the whole surrounding area, sort of 30 miles wide, including all the villages. Or it may mean going through all the neighbourhoods and speaking clearly there the message God has given him. Or it could mean going like an ambassador through a sort of formal protocol of greeting people on the first day, delivering his message on the second day and saying goodbye on the third day. It doesn't really matter. The point is it was a sizable place. And Jonah goes giving the severe warning that God had said. But think about what Jonah had just experienced. What would he have discovered about the messages God gives? Jonah after all had run away from God and God had brought him back, sent a big fish to swallow him up and rescue him and bring him back on course. Jonah was someone who had discovered in his own life that yes, God brings judgment. That's what the storm of chapter one was about. Yet God also brings rescue and gives grace. Doesn't treat us as we deserve.

So Jonah must have known that this message announcing judgment was actually an invitation to change, an invitation to repent. But there is a need for judgment, isn't there? I mean some people will say, I don't believe in a God who judges. I believe in a God of love. But actually surely if God is loving, he must judge. We want judgment to fall at least on some people, don't we? I'm sure you remember last week in the news, a doctor, Michael Salmon, who worked at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital for many years and was found guilty of terrible charges of child abuse and molestation. He's awaiting his sentence this week to find out what he'll get. But doesn't everything in us call out

for justice in a situation like that, where lives have been scarred and marred by evil deeds by one man? Well think of the villages in Nigeria being destroyed by Boko Haram.

Don't we cry out for justice for those people slaughtered by this evil group? If God loves those children, if God loves those Nigerian villagers, there must be judgment.

[10:27] There must be judgment. If God loves you, he must want judgment for those people who have hurt you. But of course the sting in the tail is, if God wants judgment for the people who have hurt me, he also needs to judge me for the people I've hurt. Well here we have a God who gives second chances, but also God who gives severe warnings. Because he's compassionate, because he is loving, judgment will come. But as we go on, we also see he's a God who gives spiritual encounters, spiritual experiences. Many people today talk about spirituality, don't they?

Sometimes he's psychic affairs at times. People talk about, you know, I'm not religious but I am spiritual. I want to be in touch with God. I've watched a couple of television programs in the last few months. One was Sue Perkins going up the Mekong River, if you saw it. Very interesting, she's very entertaining, had lots of interesting things to say. But there were a number of points where she'd be meeting with Buddhists or Hindus or out in a beautiful countryside. And she described it as being really spiritual. At one point in Tibet with a man with his sheep, she turned around and said, oh no wonder you believe in God, this is your office, looking at the mountains around. It was beautiful. But is that what a spiritual experience is? A beautiful view of mountains? Meditating? Saying a chant? As we look at what happens to the people of Nineveh, we see what a true spiritual experience is. And look how it begins. Verse 5. The people of Nineveh believed God. The people of Nineveh believed God. Do you hear that? They heard Jonah and they believed God. A spiritual experience begins with an encounter with God's word. It begins with illumination.

The old-fashioned word for it. It's like the light bulb comes on. We hear God's message and go, that is God speaking. That is God's truth. And suddenly that is where a spiritual experience begins. And you see what a radical experience it was for them. If you look at verse 4, it was immediate. So in verse 3 we hear Nineveh of the Greatest to see three days journey in breadth.

How far had Jonah gone in his preaching mission? Jonah began to go into the city going a day's journey. And he called out. So this is the immediate response from some people. Day one, as they hear it, it's like, whoa! God switches the light bulbs on. So it's immediate. It's also extensive. Verse 5. The people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast to put on sackcloth. From the greatest of them to the least of them. All of them. It wasn't one particular target group. They all had the light bulbs switched on. This is God giving them a spiritual experience. And you can see it's really of God because it led them to action. Verse 5.

[13:15] They put on, they called for a fast. They put on sackcloth. They were deeply troubled. They were deeply sorry. They were deeply humbled by the message they heard. It's a sign of a true encounter with God. So that's the first stage, illumination. As God opens their eyes to the truth. The second stage, we started to touch on it there, was conviction. If you look at verse 6, you can see how this worked out in the life of one particular person, the king.

The word reached the king of Nineveh. And he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes. Jonah's whole journey for a whole day through Nineveh has reported in just a few words. Now the camera zooms in on the throne room of the king. And it's like it goes in slow motion to make the point for us. He hears it.

He arises. He tears his robe. He covers himself in sackcloth. He sits down. This is deeply personal, his response to God's word. The sackcloth and ashes, the fasting, they're all signs of self-denial, of helplessness, of humiliation. And you can see how deep the conviction was, how deep the sense of needing to do business with the living God was. If you look on at verse 8. So the king gives this proclamation, the king and the navels. Let man and beast be covered with sackcloth and let them call out mightily to God. Just as the sailors in chapter 1 urged each other to call out to their God. So the king does now. It's deep conviction. They know they need to do business with this God who is doing business with them. So there's illumination, conviction. And that conviction, do you notice, it's specific. Look at the end of verse 8.

Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. They knew they were doing bad things. There were violence that almost certainly included oppression of the weak and the poor in the city. But here they're specific about it. They're convicted that these are things that need to change. These are things in their lives that they need to turn away from. So illumination, conviction. And the third part of this spiritual encounter that God gives is faith and repentance. We

see that there in verses 8 and 9. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. And who knows, God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish. You see, they don't have great faith because they don't know much about this God. But they know they need to change. They know life needs to be different. And so they turn from their sin to look to God for help. That's faith and repentance. They come together as a package in true spiritual encounters as God gives them to us. Think for a moment. If I told you to turn away from these windows, well I get upset and you're looking at me then, but where would you turn to? You'd turn to that wall there, wouldn't you? It's the same action. You turn from one thing to the other. So turning from their sin, from their rebellion, from their evil ways, they look to God. Maybe he'll hear us. Maybe he'll forgive us. So this is a sign of a true spiritual encounter. Doesn't begin with meditation. Doesn't begin with beautiful views. Doesn't begin with thinking fluffy thoughts. It begins with the word of God. Illumination. As God opens our eyes to his truth. It goes to conviction. As we realise this is real, this is true, something needs to change. And it results in faith and repentance. God grants us faith and helps us to turn away. Enables us to turn away from our rebellion against him. You know, she always has that sense of helplessness. Verse 9. Who knows if God will forgive? I'm in his hands now. That's what faith is. So that's the mark of a true spiritual experience. Have you had one of those experiences? Is that the story of your life? The word of God striking you profoundly, turning you around. My prayer is that would be something that is true for all of us. So he's a God who gives second chances. He's a God who gives severe warnings because he's loving. He's a God who gives spiritual encounters. But also he's a God of saving compassion. Far from being a capricious malevolent bully. He is the Lord God Almighty, the God of the Bible who has orchestrated this whole series of events that Jonah's preaching in order to rescue the city. We can see that there in verse 10. When the Lord saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he said he would do to them. And he did not do it. See the warning is given so that people will change, will turn, will trust in God and avoid the judgment. In fact later on in the Bible through the prophet Jeremiah, that's exactly what God said his prophecies were about. So Jeremiah chapter 18 verse 7. The Lord says this, if at any time I declare concerning a nation or kingdom that I will plug it up and break down and destroy it. And if that nation concerning which I've spoken, transphobic evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do. Of course Jonah had experienced that in his own life. He experienced God's saving compassion. Bringing him up out of the water through the whale. Putting him back on firm ground. Giving him a mission to declare. And Jonah's experience, three days and nights in the belly of a big fish, was just a little sketch, a little illustration. A little foretaste of what would happen one day to another messenger, greater messenger that God would send. When a whole bunch of religious leaders came to the Lord Jesus and said, give us a sign, let us see that you really are from God. Jesus said this to them, Matthew 12. Jesus answered them, an evil and adulterous generation looks for a sign. But no sign will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

[19 : 39] For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And behold, something greater than Jonah is here. Jonah, after his three days of experiencing death, as it were, in that fish, was sent out to preach a message of forgiveness. The Lord Jesus, after he rose from the dead, sent his apostles out into all the world, and all believers now into all the world, to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins. Yes, there is a severe warning. This same Jesus will come back. But there is also the opportunity to receive God's forgiveness, because he is a God of saving compassion. So I guess in this room today there are three types of people. Some of us have heard this message about Jesus before, and we've believed it, we've had a spiritual encounter. The question for us is, are we telling other people that good needs? Are we telling other people this is the way to have a spiritual encounter? It's through the living God, through the Lord Jesus Christ. I guess some of us here have heard this message, but don't yet know what to make of it. Can I urge you not to sit on the fence, not to put it off, but to look into this, to take it seriously. Think, could this be a severe warning that I need to look out for? Please don't delay. The people of Nineveh didn't, did they? They responded straight away. Now some others have perhaps heard this message and believe it intellectually in our heads, but it hasn't yet impacted our hearts the way it did the people of Nineveh. If that's you, then why not pray that this great God of compassion, this God who gives second chances as well as severe warnings, this God who gives spiritual encounters as well as showing great compassion. We are working your heart to give you that encounter that will lead you

to faith and repentance and turn you from the judgment that is coming to the grace and forgiveness that can be ours in Jesus. Let me pray.