

An Introduction to the Book of Jonah

Jonah

Pastor Jeremy Cagle, July 28, 2019

We are beginning a brand new sermon series. We're going to start looking at a book that we've never studied before as a church, and it is the book of Jonah. So, if you would, turn there with me in your Bibles to the Book of Jonah. That's the book we are in this morning. And while you're turning there, if you're joining us for the first time today, you picked a good Sunday to be here because this is the first sermon in a series called "A Whale of a Tale" series because that's what the Book of Jonah is about. It is a whale of a tale. It's a one of a kind book in the Bible. There's nothing else like it.

They say the one thing you need in preaching is variety, the one thing you want is variation. You don't want to do the same thing every week or you'll put people to sleep. You can't get any more different than the Book of Jonah. This is the one of the most original books in the Bible. For example, there's a whale in it or a big fish of some kind. Ain't that cool? I like that idea. That's really neat. And then he swallows a guy who lives in it for three days and three nights. You can't make that stuff up. That is incredible.

Then you have a renegade Hebrew prophet who made that necessary in the first place. He gave the whale indigestion. That's why he swallowed him. To my knowledge, this is the only time you see this in the Bible. It's the only time you see a prophet running away from God. That's in the Book of Jonah. It's what the whole Book is about. God told Jonah to go this way, Jonah went that way and God went after him with a whale. That's the story.

Then you have the fact that the Lord sent him to a place called Nineveh, one of the meanest, cruelest cities on earth. He sent him to preach to a people that would a few centuries later capture Jerusalem and enslave the Jews. This is a very unusual book. This is a whale of a tale. It's one of a kind. And this morning we're going to begin our study of it. We're going to look at this unusual book together.

And just to give you some background on it, Jonah is the 32nd book in the Bible. If you were to count them all up one by one - is the 32nd book in the Bible, and it is the fifth book in a section that is known as the Minor Prophets. The Old Testament has four sections to it. If you were to look in your table of contents, you would see it's divided up into four parts in your English Bibles. You have the law books - Genesis through Deuteronomy. You have the history books, you have the poetry books, and finally, at the end of the Old Testament, you have the prophetic books. The books of prophecy. And the books of prophecy are divided into two sections; the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets. The Minor Prophets are called minor because of their size, not because of their importance. They're not minor because they're less important, they're minor because they're smaller. God likes small things. I say that a lot because I'm short. But Jonah falls into the section known as the Minor Prophets, and they include books like Hosea, Joel and Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi.

When I was doing my ordination exam, they asked us to audibly repeat all the books of the Bible. And I got all of them, but right there, that was tough. These are the books that we kind of forget, aren't they? These are the books we don't study very much. There are 12 of them altogether. Some think that was to match the 12 tribes of Israel. But they're largely forgotten

by Christians today. Let's be honest, a lot of us have never read a Minor Prophet book in the Bible, have we? We've never read one of these books. Many of us have never studied them. We don't really know what they're talking about. They've got weird names, hard to pronounce. But this is a shame because these books tell us so much about the world that Jesus stepped into. These are the books that lay a foundation for what would later become the New Testament.

For one thing, the Minor Prophets tell us that Israel was very weak at this point in time spiritually. They were very weak. To put it bluntly, they were a train wreck. They were a disaster. They were so bad that we're going to read about a prophet this morning who ran away from God. But the Prophet Malachi writing at the end of the Old Testament says this - these are some of the last words in the Old Testament. He says, "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the temple gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you," says the Lord of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you." That is how the Old Testament ended. A thousand years of history, and that's how it stopped, with God saying, "I will not accept an offering from you anymore. You don't care, your heart's not in it. So, I wish they were one among you who would just shut the temple gates." The Minor Prophets tell us that. They tell us that Israel was at a very low point at this time in their history. There's a reason the Jews crucified Jesus. It's not because they were on a plateau spiritually, they were at the bottom of the barrel.

The Minor Prophets also tell us how unstable the world was at this time. It was a very unstable world. If you think your world is unstable, it's nothing like this. If you remember, your Bible history, for a moment after Solomon died, his son, Rehoboam, he split the kingdom in two with Israel forming in the north and Judah forming in the south. And as a result of that, both kingdoms were too weak to last. The whole nation wasn't that big anyway, but you split it in two and it's even smaller and weaker. And Second Kings 17 says, it wasn't long before the northern kingdom fell. And other books tell us, it wasn't long before the southern kingdom fell too. But all the while, while they were falling and while they were split, the Jews could feel the kingdom of Babylon breathing down their necks.

You could read books like First and Second Kings and you can just feel the city of Nineveh waiting to pounce. Nineveh was 600 miles from Jerusalem. That's the distance from here to Calgary. It was right in their own backyard. And so this was a very vulnerable time for Israel. They were like a ping pong ball being bounced back and forth between slavery and freedom, slavery and freedom. They never knew when they were going to be put in chains. The Minor Prophets teach us that as well.

They also teach us that in the midst of this chaos and horrible history, God still loved the Jews. It's one more lesson the Minor Prophets teach us, is that God still love the Jews. Even though He said, "I wish you would shut the temple gates," God didn't shut them, He left them open for His people. You would think that after all Israel had done against Him, God would say, "That's enough, I'm through with you. We're finished. You had your chance and you blew it. You had multiple chances and you blew it." But He doesn't do that. He still sends prophets after them. The northern kingdom falls, He keeps sending prophets. The southern kingdom falls, He keeps sending prophets. And then after the southern kingdom falls, He sends Nehemiah back. You remember that story, to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. Then He sends Ezra back to rebuild the temple. And then He sends Jesus and they crucify Him. They put the Lord of glory on a cross, and then what does He do? He sends the Holy Spirit. God never stops sending help to His people. He never gives up. He keeps sending and

sending and sending, He keeps giving and giving and giving Himself away because that's the kind of God we serve. A thousand years of God chasing after these people.

In his commentary on the Book of Jonah, James Montgomery Boice says this, he says,

The prophets remind us of the great love God has for His people. It's because of His great love that He sends prophets to them in the first place. He didn't have to do that. Nobody made Him do that. He did it because He loved them.

And the story is told of a king whose subjects rebelled against him. They mutinied against his rulership until his armies fought them and defeated them in battle. And afterwards, the rebels threw themselves at his feet, they begged the king for mercy and he gave it. He pardoned them and let them go. And when one of his friends heard about it, he said to the king, "But didn't you say that every rebel should die? Didn't you say that they should all be executed?" And the king said this, he said, "Yes, I did say that but I see no rebels here." He said, "These people are my friends now." See, that's what the Minor Prophets were saying to Israel. That was their message. "If you would stop fighting, God will forgive you. If you would repent and turn back to Him, He will say, 'I see no rebels here.'" They said it over and over and over again. You read it time and time and time again in these books. It's been said that God is a good forgetter. If you repent, He will forget your sin. He will nail it to the cross, and it will be finished once and for all. And that's what the Minor Prophets said - "God will forgive your sin." And that's the message of the book of Jonah.

This is the background for this book that we're in this morning. Jonah wrote in a time like this. He wrote in a very unstable world. And his message went to a very unusual people. He didn't say this just to the Jews. Jonah went to someone else outside of Israel. And that's what we're going to talk about this morning. So, if you're taking notes, to begin our series this morning, I want to give you three introductions to the book of Jonah. That's our outline for today. That's what this book is about or that's what our sermon's about; three introductions to the book of Jonah. Next week, we're going to start going through the book in detail and looking at it verse by verse, chapter by chapter. But this week, I just want to introduce it to you and kind of whet your appetite for the book.

Have you ever wondered how to respond to a messed up world? Do you guys live in a messed up world? Does anybody here live under a rock or in a cave somewhere? You guys live in a messed up world. Jonah tells you how to respond to that or maybe a better way, he tells you how not to respond to that. That's one lesson in this.

Has God ever told you to do something you didn't want to do? Has God ever given you a command that you didn't like? Jonah's about that as well. Has He ever told you to forgive someone you didn't want to forgive? There's lots of lessons in this book. It's a wonderful story in the Bible. And let's talk about that with three introductions to the book of Jonah.

The first one is this, an introduction to the author. The book begins by giving us an introduction to the author or the main character of the book. The main character is Jonah, which is why the book is named after him. He's the key figure in the story. But the book is written anonymously. We don't really know who wrote it. It doesn't say, but most scholars believe Jonah did because he had all the information. He's the only one who experienced this. He's the only one that goes to Tarshish, he's the only one who gets on a ship. He's the only

one who's swallowed by a whale. All those kinds of things. So, either he wrote it or he gave the information to someone else who wrote it.

But he starts off this way in verses 1 through 2. If you read in Jonah 1:1-2, it says, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, 'Arise, and go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.'" Just to point out a few things here, if you notice, this is a very brief introduction. And what I mean is Jonah just goes right into the story. He doesn't give you any background, he doesn't give you any details. He just starts out, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah" because that's what the book is really about, that's all that matters – it's about the word of the Lord. In other words, God is really the hero in the book of Jonah, not Jonah. God is who it's all about. The book really should be called "God" but that would be the name of every book in the Bible, really.

But verse 1 starts out, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah." Jonah is in the prophetic section of the Bible because it's about the word of the Lord. It's actually a history book. You could put this in the history books of the Bible. It's all history. But that's why it sits where it is in the Bible.

If you notice, it says that God spoke to a prophet named Jonah, which means a "dove" in Hebrew. His name means "dove." It's a very peaceful name for such a rebellious man, such a restless man. And there you see his father's name as well in verse one. It says, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai," which means "truth." So, Jonah was the son of truth. It's a great name for a prophet. He was the son of honesty. We all want honest prophets. That's who this man was supposed to be. And if you notice, that's all we read about him here. We don't get any more information.

But if you would keep your finger in the book of Jonah and turn over to Second Kings, we see his name mentioned one other time in the Bible. He's mentioned in the book of Second Kings chapter 14. Second Kings comes after First Kings and before the book of Third Kings. If you find Third Kings, please come up and tell me after the service, and we'll take a look at your Bible. It's not in there. But Second Kings 14:23-25 tells us about this man. Verse 23 says,

23 In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. 24 He did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin. 25 He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant (and there is the name we're looking for) Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher.

So, we learn a few things about Jonah here that we didn't see in the book of Jonah. One is we learn that he's from a place called Gath-hepher, which was located in the vicinity of Nazareth, where Jesus was from. If you remember at one time, Nicodemus was arguing with the Pharisees and the Pharisee said, "No prophet comes from Galilee." Well, Jonah did. They got it wrong. Jonah was from this area. That may be why Jesus talked about him quite a bit in His ministry. If you visit there today, you can see a tomb called the "Tomb of Jonah." You can go and see where he was supposedly buried. But that's one thing we learn here. He's a prophet from Galilee.

Another thing we learn in Second Kings, is that he's been a prophet for possibly some time. There's been some period of time where Jonah has been prophesying. It may not have been new to him. So, Jonah 1:1 says, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah," that's not the only time that happened. He was regularly hearing the word of the Lord.

And we also learn in Second Kings that Jonah regularly prophesied during bad times. Verse 23 of Second Kings 14 says, "Jeroboam did evil in the eyes of the Lord." He was an evil king. These were not good times. Which means Jonah was used to ministering during chaos. He was used to preaching during the worst of times and giving people hope, which is what he does here. He tells them God would restore their boundaries.

But apparently, Jonah had a problem giving hope to the Gentiles, and that's where our story picks up in Jonah chapter 1. This is where things turn sour for him. Apparently, Jonah had a hard time doing this for non-Jews. He was okay prophesying in Israel, he was okay preaching good news and hope for his people. But once he left there, it all broke down. And if you look in verse one of Jonah chapter 1, it says,

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." 3 But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (I'm not saying that with a lisp there. It actually is pronounced Tarshish – two "sh" in that word.) So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

It says, the word of the Lord told Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh, which he did. He arose immediately and what did he do? He went to another place – Tarshish. Verse 1 says, "Arise and go to Nineveh." Verse 3 says, "But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish." He didn't walk there, he fled there. He didn't take his time, he got there as fast as he could. In fact, you see the word "Tarshish" repeated three or four times in that passage to point out this is where he went a long way away.

If you look at a map of the ancient world, Nineveh is located in the modern day country of Iraq. We'll talk about that in a minute. But it's located in the heart of the Middle East. Tarshish is located in Spain. We've had some young ladies come back from Spain, right? You guys were there. That is 3,500 miles away. That's a whole world away at this time. Modern travel, we go all kinds of places. We have planes, trains and automobiles. But back then, this was as far as it was possible to go. You couldn't go to China, nobody did that back then. And you couldn't go to North America. Jonah literally bought a ticket to nowhere because he didn't want to do what God said. God told him to go this way, he went his way. God told him to go east, so he went west. And we'll talk about the people of Nineveh in a moment, the reason he did that.

But before, I want to just mention right here, God uses all types of people, doesn't He? God uses all types of people. Jonah was not the stuff from which heroes were made. We make a hero out of him today, but he was not being a hero here. As a matter of fact, you know that God inspired this book because this book does nothing but put Jonah in a bad light. And if he wrote it, he was a very humble man. I mean, he flees at the beginning of the book and at the end of the book, he's complaining and that's how the book ends. Fleeing and complaining. He has probably the greatest ministry maybe in all of human history, at least the greatest immediate reaction to his preaching, and he's mad about it at the end of the book - mad about

it. This book is a preacher's dream and he is just a mess. In fact, it's been said that everything obeys God in the book of Jonah except Jonah. Everything obeys the Lord in this book except this man. And look at what God does through him because God uses all types of people. God is the hero of the story, not Jonah. God is the one we should give glory to in this story, not this man.

Some of you are wondering if God can use you today. You're wondering if God can speak through you after all you have done, the sins you've committed, the times you've run away from God. But I want to encourage you (and this is a main point of the story) if God can use a man like this, He can use you. Amen? If God can speak through this kind of person, He can speak through anybody.

Which leads to another lesson we learn right here and let's just say this, you can't run from God, can you? You can't run from God. Jonah went as far away as he could go in the ancient world, and God caught him, no problem. You see the phrase "presence of the Lord" mentioned twice in verse 3 because that's where Jonah was running from. Not His omnipresence - Jonah knew he couldn't run from God's ever presence. But he didn't want to do what God said, and so he ran away. But you can't do that. Your feet are not fast enough, your brain is not smart enough. You can't run from God. Where are you going to go? You go to the sea, God is there. You go to the land, God is there. You get on board a ship, God is there. You get swallowed by a whale, God is there. God is everywhere.

The story is told of a cowboy...I like cowboy preaching stories. They're always a lot of fun...But the story is told of a cowboy who met with an insurance agent to get some insurance. And the agent asked him, "Did you have any accidents last year? Did you have any mishaps?" And the cowboy said, "No I didn't, but I got chased by a bull and I got kicked by a horse and I got bitten by a rattlesnake, but I didn't have any accidents." The insurance agent said, "Well, what do you call those? I mean those sound like accidents. What do you call those?" And the cowboy said, "They weren't accidents because they did it on purpose." You get a taste of that here. Everything that happens in the book of Jonah happens on purpose. There are no accidents in this book. There are no mishaps. Everything you see in here was to draw Jonah back or to draw the Ninevites back to the Lord. Throughout this whole book is about God chasing a man down and he gets His man. You can't run from God.

Whatever you're going through this morning, whatever sin you're wrestling with, whatever temptations are in your heart, if you feel like Jonah, if you want to run away, I want to tell you don't. Some of you are in a marriage right now you want to run from. Things are hard for you. God is telling you to love your wife, God is telling you to love your husband and you don't want to do it. Well, I want to ask you this, to be very blunt, what other option do you have? You can't run from God. You have to stay with Him. Some of you are wanting to run from your church family. Maybe us or maybe another church family that you come from because there's unreconciled relationships there. There's conflict, and you don't want to go back and forgive somebody. Let me ask you this, what other option do you have? Where are you going to go? Whatever the case is, you cannot run from this God. David said, "If I ascend into heaven, God is there, and if I make my bed in Sheol, in the depths, God will find me." He'll find you in the sea, He'll find you on dry land. He'll find you in a boat and He'll find you in a whale. There's nowhere you can go.

So, obey Him now before you regret it later. Listen, friends, if you're a Christian, the question is not, "Am I going to obey God?" You can read Hebrews 12 and other passages that talk

about the fact that if you don't obey God as a believer, God will discipline you. You have to obey. The question is, are you going to do it the easy way or the hard way? Are you going to do it before the whale or after? I mean, which one do you want? I love the story about the whale...It may have been a fish by the way, it may not have been a whale. But a whale of a tale, that sounds really good as a sermon illustration or a sermon title...But I want to encourage you this morning to take the easy way. Obey Him now before you live to regret it. That's another lesson in the book of Jonah.

Which leads to the next introduction for this book. The first one is an introduction to the author. The author's name is Jonah. His name means "dove" or the "son of truth," which is a fitting name for a prophet. He was supposed to be a gentle man and a man of truth. But here we see him not living up to his name. He's fleeing from God, running from His presence and God chases after Him.

Which leads to another introduction to this book, and that is an introduction to the setting. Next, we're introduced to the setting or the location of the book. He tells us where this story takes place. It takes place in several locations. There's several settings for it that we could talk about it. It's an interesting book in that way. Most books in the Old Testament, particularly Minor Prophets, a lot of them take place in Israel. This one takes place in Israel, on a ship, in the bottom of the sea. But the biggest place we see it occur in is Nineveh. The majority of the book, the last two chapters anyway, take place in Nineveh. And you see this in Jonah 3:1-4. If you would turn over there with me, this is where we pick up the story. I won't get into the whole thing of Jonah being swallowed by the fish. We'll talk about that in the weeks to come. It says in verse 1 of chapter 3, it says,

3 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, and go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. 4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

If you notice as you read that (and this is why I read this to you), that starts off the same way that chapter 1 did. It's almost word for word what you read in Jonah 1:1-3. Because it's almost as if God is saying, "Okay Jonah, you didn't hear me the first time, so I'm going to say it again. The command is the same; arise and go to Nineveh. You didn't listen the first time I gave My Word, you didn't pay attention to me. So, now that you're out of the fish, now that I have your attention, go do what I said before."

Chapter 1:17 says that Jonah spent three days and three nights in the fish. And chapter 2:10 says that, "Then the lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land." Just in case you thought that was a pleasant experience for him, it says the fish vomited him up. We've all seen some of these shows with Jonah singing in the belly of the fish and having a big old time. One commentator said it would've been a living hell. You're in the juices of the fish's belly. It's warm in there because things are being digested all around you. It's dark. You don't know where you are. And then it vomited him up. And Jonah, very logically said, "I would rather go to Nineveh than do that again." So, that's what he did. We don't know where it spit him up. It could have spit him up back in Israel. That would have been interesting, right back where he started. It could have taken him closer to the city.

But as I just mentioned, Nineveh was located in the heart of the Middle East. It's right in the middle of the Assyrian Empire. And it had been there a long time. Nineveh was one of the oldest cities in the world. Genesis 10:11 says, "From that land he went forth into Assyria, and built Nineveh..." That's interesting. But Nineveh is mentioned in the book of Genesis. It was built right after the flood. It was very old and it was very beautiful. A lot of ancient accounts tell us of the beauty of Nineveh. It said they had walls that were so thick that two chariots could cross side by side on the walls without bumping into each other. Pretty incredible.

But they were also very mean. Nineveh was one of the cruelest cities on earth at the time. We studied the book of Titus and we talked about the island of Crete. Cretans were mean, but maybe in a rambunctious kind of way, like a pirating kind of way. Nineveh was cruel on a whole other level. In my studies on this, I came across some quotations from some Assyrian kings that talk about this. They talk about their cruelty in their own words. And I just wanted to read this to you so you can kind of get a feel for what Jonah was going through as the Lord told him to go there. In the accounts of one of his battles, the king Ashurnasirpal II said this - he said,

I stormed the mountain peaks and I overtook my enemies. In the midst of the mighty mountains, I slaughtered them and with their blood, I dyed the mountain red like crimson. The heads of the warriors, I cut off and I formed them into a pillar against the city. The young men I burned in the fire along with their maidens, and regarding their captured leader, I skinned him alive. And I hung his skin on the city walls as a deterrent for all who would oppose me.

So, that's how the Assyrians treated their enemies. That's what they did to them. Cut off their heads, burn them in the fire and skin them alive just to make a point. And the point was, "Don't mess with us. Just let us roll through." You read that same kind of thing over and over and over again in their accounts. I read another one about a commander that was captured and the king said, "I pierced his chin with my dagger and through his jaw I passed a rope and I put a dog chain upon him and led into my kennel until he died there."

And this particular king went on to say, "I am powerful, I am a hero, I am gigantic, I am colossal, I am honoured, I am magnificent and I am without equal among all kings." So, not only were they cruel, they were arrogant. They had a narcissistic complex. These guys were proud. And you can just read these things and tell why Jonah didn't want to go there, can't you? Would any of you want to go to a place like that and preach and tell them to repent? If you like your skin on your body and your head on your neck, you would stay far away from Nineveh. You don't go there.

It was pretty unusual for a prophet in the Old Testament to actually leave Israel and go prophesy somewhere. You saw a few accounts of that. Elijah did that, Elisha did that. But they typically went very close around. They were just in Samaria or some places around Israel. This is totally different.

I knew a pastor in seminary who served for several decades in the Hispanic ghetto in Los Angeles, and he ministered in one of the worst parts of the city. And he says that when he first moved there, he thought he had moved to hell. He said, "I thought Satan was living next door because of all the violence and the mayhem." And he says, "At first, I didn't want to go there. At first, I just thought it was awful until the Lord changed my heart." And you see the same kind of thing happening with Jonah. He didn't want to go to this place. As far as he was

concerned, God could go ahead and destroy them. Which makes the next part of the story incredible.

If you look in verses 4 through 10, this is what happens in the story. It says,

4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God (that's the amazing part of the story); and they called a fast and they put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. 6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. 7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. 9 And who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish." 10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

This has been called one of the greatest revivals in human history. One of the greatest awakenings ever recorded. Chapter 4:11 if you notice, it says there were 120,000 persons living in Nineveh at this time who did not know the difference between their right hand and their left. And it's taken for several things, but one reference it could be is to children. And if that's the case, if this is how many children that were in the city of Nineveh, that means there could have been half a million people or more altogether. And here it says the king called them all to repent. Now, whether it was a lasting repentance or not, we don't know. They may have gone back to their evil ways. But the point is at this moment in time, they did listen to Jonah. They called a fast and put on sackcloth, and they heard his message, which is absolutely incredible. They should have skinned him alive and put his skin on the wall. They should have cut off his head or put a ring through his nose and led him off to the kennel, but they responded like this.

It wasn't much of a message Jonah told them. If you notice back up in verse 4, he says, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." That's not the stuff of which revivals are made. That's not the stuff which brings in the crowds to repent. Knowing Jonah and his attitude, he probably muttered, "Yet forty days and Nineveh ...". Or he might've said, "God's going to get you. I can't wait." But whatever it was (if he said more, he might've said more - probably did) they believed.

John Stott says, "The symbol of Christianity is the cross and not the scales. The Gospel is good news to the undeserving, not to those who deserve." And that's what you see here. Amen? This is about God's mercy. This is about God's grace to the least deserving people on earth. Nobody deserved mercy less than the Assyrians. Nobody deserved grace less than these people. But that's the point of mercy, isn't it? You don't deserve it. That's the point of grace. You shouldn't have it and God gives it to you anyway.

I don't know about you guys, but I read a book like this and I say, how could God do this to the Assyrians? How could God be kind to them? They were an evil people, they were a bad people, they should be punished right away, which is true. They were a bad people. But

friends, let me tell you this, so were you when God saved you, amen? So was I. So, why can't he save them? Why can't God show mercy to these people? He's going to have all eternity to judge people that are bad, but He can show mercy now. What's going to stop Him? We could make it even more personal. We could put this on a very contemporary level and talk about how we watch the news. And I know you do this, we all do this. We watch the latest headlines and Vancouver or Toronto or Montreal or wherever, and we say, how could God forgive a people like this? How could He save people - they're evil, they're bad. Yeah, that's true. They are bad. But so were you when God saved you. So, why can't He save them? What's stopping Him?

Friends, we need to be careful that we don't think we have an exclusive claim on the mercy of God. We need to be careful that we don't think His grace is for us and no one else. God's mercy is for anyone who believes. Amen? And that means anyone. His forgiveness is for anyone who repents; the Assyrians, the Ninevites, the Vancouverites, Chilliwackites...is that how you say it, Chilliwackians?...anyone.

This is why Jonah struggled so much. This is why he had a hard time with his story, because he didn't understand the mercy of God and how far it extended. This is mercy on a scale that's hard to articulate, hard to believe. These are Israel's enemies. These are the people Israel should hate, and God is doing this in the Old Testament. Many of us struggle with this too, which leads us to the last point we need to talk about this morning. One more introduction to the book.

Just to review these other ones. First, we see an introduction to the author. His name is Jonah. He's a prophet who ran from the Lord. He fled from His presence. He went his way when God told him to go this way. Second, we see an introduction to the setting. It takes place in Nineveh, one of the meanest cities in the ancient world. They just made a sport out of hurting people. And He shows them grace on a scale that's hard to believe.

And that leads us to the third point we're going to look at this morning, a third introduction to the book, and that is the purpose of the book. Third, I just want to introduce you to the purpose of the Book of Jonah. The purpose of the book is to show mercy like we just talked about. This book is about mercy from start to finish; mercy toward Jonah, mercy toward the people of Nineveh, mercy even toward the Israelites who are later reading this book. Listen, when Jonah went into the ocean, God did not have to send a fish after him, right? God could have said, "You did this and you deserve it, you can drown." It was all about His mercy. A lot of people think the Old Testament is all about judgment. They think the Old Testament is all about a God of anger and a God of wrath, and you don't see His mercy until you get to the New Testament, but that's not true. God's mercy is right here. Jonah is one of the most merciful books in the Bible. Even today, the Jews read the book of Jonah on the Day of Atonement to remind them of God's mercy and to remind them to repent. And we see this at the end of the book in chapter 4:9-11. We're just kind of covering and surveying the book as a whole. But these are the last words in the Book of Jonah in chapter 4:9-11. This is how it ends. It says,

9 Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?"
And Jonah said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death." (It's a pretty strong thing to say to God)
10 Then the Lord said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.
11 Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the

great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and the left hand, as well as many animals?”

If you wonder what that's about, just before the book ends, Jonah goes and sits on top of the hill outside the city of Nineveh to watch God bring judgment on them. He's just preached judgment. He has just preached the coming wrath of God and he thinks they're going to get it. So, he goes up on top of the hill, waits to see what happens, and the Lord, creates a plant to give Jonah some shade. It just grows up very quickly. And then to prove a point, the Lord kills the plant. To teach him a lesson, the Lord sends a worm in chapter 4:7 to destroy it. And when He does, Jonah flies into a rage. He goes into a depression. And the Lord says, “Jonah, don't you see? You care more about this stupid plant than you do the people of Nineveh. You care more about your comfort and your well-being than you do these half a million people.”

And that's how the book ends. That is the ending of the book. It ends just as abruptly as it starts with the Lord confronting Jonah for his sin, rebuking him for his bad attitude. It's a sad story for Jonah. It starts off with him running from God and it ends up like this, arguing with the Lord.

Now, the good news is you probably have the Book of Jonah in your hands because in humility, this man told this to someone or he wrote it all down. If you did this, you probably wouldn't put it in a book. Amen? As matter of fact, the Gospels, if you were Peter or someone like that, you would probably never tell people what you did. So, it's good news at the end of the day. It's tragic right here - it ends this way. It ends on a question - so that we can all put ourselves in the story. It ends this way so we can all put ourselves in Jonah's shoes and ask ourselves, what would we do if we were in a situation like this? What would we do if we saw the city of Nineveh repent? If we preached judgment, went up on a hill and waited for God to just get these sinners. And then He didn't because they repented. What would we do? What would you do?

In preparation for the sermon, I came across a list of ways you can be judgmental towards people, ways you can do what Jonah did. And it included several things like criticizing people. You can be judgmental when you're constantly critical towards people, putting them down. Jumping to conclusions too quickly was another one. You got everything figured out. Everybody figured out like that. But one more way to tell you're judgmental (and this was helpful), is that you really, really, really struggle with mercy. You're a judgmental person when you really, really, really struggle with mercy. When you have a hard time forgiving people, when you have a hard time extending grace.

And let's be honest, this is hard for people in the church, isn't it? This is hard stuff for us. Because we forget how merciful God has been to us. We forget how gracious God has been to us. It's one accusation a lot of unbelievers bring against the church that it's so judgmental. Well, let's be honest, oftentimes, they're right. Because we forget what it was like to be a non-believer. After all Jonah had just done, the last thing he should do is sit on top of a hill and wait for God to destroy somebody. You kind of want to ask him, “Do you want to go back in the fish again? You just ran from God, you just abandoned your post as a prophet and you're going to act like this?” It's because he forgot the mercy God has shown him.

The story is told of the time a father and a son had become estranged. They got into a fight, and so the son ran away and the father searched for him for years to no avail, he couldn't find his son. And so finally...(This is occurring in Spain. We just talked about Spain a moment

ago)...finally, the father put an advertisement in the newspaper that said, "Dear Pako, my son, meet me in front of the newspaper office this Sunday at noon. All is forgiven, all is forgotten. I love you sincerely, your dad." And on the following Sunday at noon, 800 Pakos showed up, all looking for forgiveness from their father. Friends, we're like that, aren't we? We need forgiveness. Not just the Assyrians, but the Israelites too. Not just the people of Nineveh, but the people of Jerusalem and the people of Chilliwack, we should see ourselves in this story. We should rejoice over such an outlandish display of mercy.

It's been said that the older brother in the Prodigal Son, he did not keep one of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. He didn't keep one commandment in the Sermon on the Mount. He was religious, he was righteous, but his whole inside was dead to God. You don't want to be that way my friends. A story like this should bring you joy.

In fact, we can put it this way, if you've messed up today and you know it, if you can identify with the Assyrians in the story or even with Jonah, and you need mercy, you've come to the right place because we serve a merciful God. We serve a God who is in the saving business. He wants to save you, He wants to show you His grace. You just need to ask for it. You need to repent like the Ninevites did. And He will give it full and free. Remember, God is a good forgetter. He will forget your sin. He will say to you, "There are no rebels here," but you have to stop running from Him first. You have to stop going to Tarshish and run to Him instead. Do that, and He'll save you. Do that, and He will forgive all you've ever done. The Puritan author, Jeremy Taylor said,

God's mercy is like a rainbow. You see it once and that is it. You have one chance to receive it, you have one chance to enjoy it in this life and then it's over for you. Refuse His mercy now and you will have His judgment for all eternity.

Friends, let me ask you this morning, what will it be? Will it be mercy or judgment from God? Choose His mercy now, and He will be glad that you did. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for Your mercy this morning. Just as we explore a story like Jonah, there's so much to say. And there's so much that we can't even get our minds around; that You would do a thing like this. You were merciful to Your prophet, You were merciful to the Ninevites and God, it's just a reminder You're merciful to us.

Thank you for Christ who forgives our sin. Thank you for the Saviour who died on the cross that evil people like us could be forgiven and free. And as we come to Your table this morning, would You be glorified as we remember what He has done. Would You be honoured as we remember Your mercy. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.