

Jonah 3:3-10

Summer Series; Minor Prophets – Jonah

July 5-6, 2015

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city — a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." 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.

The gift of Freedom is a wonderful gift that God has given us and our nation. It is easy to celebrate our freedom on the 4th of July weekend. As we celebrated this weekend, we also need to remember the price that was paid for that freedom – the lives that were given so that I might have a better and free life.

This morning, we also give thanks for a greater freedom that God has given each of us – freedom from the grips of Satan. We remember the freedom that Jesus brought to us through his death on the cross and through faith in him. This freedom could only have been given to us by a GREAT God and at a great price. In a number of places throughout the pages of Jonah, he uses the word "great." Several times the city of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire is called a "great city." When Jonah tried to run away from God, he sent a "great wind" to create a "great storm." God would provide a "great fish" to swallow Jonah after he had been thrown into the sea. And after the "great wind" and the "great storm" had calmed down, and after the "great fish" had vomited Jonah back on dry land, we see remember how the unwilling prophet finally went to preach to the great city of Nineveh.

The book of Jonah is about the great things used by God to do great things. But the greatest thing of all is not found in the city, the wind, the storm or the fish that swallowed Jonah. No, the greatest thing is the great God whose great mercy for Jonah and the people of Nineveh, is at the center of everything else we are told about in this book. Let's see the message that God shares with us through the **Unwilling Prophet of Jonah**.

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. This is a big city. The people were protected by massive walls. The walls were said to have been 100 feet high and wide enough for 3 chariots to be driven next to each other on the roadway running along its top. There may have been a half million people in the city. And they Assyrians. They were not nice people. As a city and as a nation, the Assyrians were known much more for cruelty than for kindness. They worshiped idols, false gods rather than the true God. In Jonah's mind, Nineveh didn't deserve to hear God's Word because of how sinful they were. So, when God gave Jonah the directive to go to the Assyrians, Jonah went the other way. When God had him swallowed up the belly of a great fish, Jonah got some sense. This unwilling prophet then would go to the unwilling people of Nineveh to tell them about a God who was willing to save them.

When you look at the Ninevites and God's treatment of them here in this book, it really shows the compassion, mercy and pity that God has for them. He loved them. He loved them even when they did not love him back. His whole desire was to bring them to repentance because of their sins, not to roast them in hell. From start to finish this message comes through loud and clear in the book of Jonah. Throughout the pages of the whole bible we see the message of God's grace. God so loved THE WORLD. God doesn't want ANYONE to perish but wants EVERYONE to come to repentance. God wants ALL MEN to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. That includes the wicked people of Nineveh.

A couple a while ago was speaking about a flight that they once had been on. After worrying for half an hour that they wouldn't get on an overbooked flight, they were summoned to the check-in desk. A smiling agent whispered that this was their lucky day. To get them on the plane he was bumping them up to first class. This was the first and only time they had been so pampered on an airplane—good food, hot coffee, plenty of elbowroom. During the flight they began

to play a little game, trying to guess who else didn't belong in first class. One man stuck out. He walked around in his socks, he kept picking up and placing down magazine. He was on flight that had those in-flight phones on the back of the seats. He played with it, but never used. He sneezed so loud they thought the oxygen masks would drop down. And when the attendant brought linen **tablecloths** for their breakfast trays, he tucked his into his collar as a bib. Truly a misfit for first class! They thought.

Look around. Do you see *misfits* around you? We see them all the time because we see ourselves. We are *misfits* in God's eyes. We think of *misfits* as people who don't *belong*, when compared to us. But, you know what the real truth is? We don't belong in God's Church than we do. We don't deserve to be in heaven. We sin against our God every day. We need Jonah's message just as much as the Ninevites did: "**Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.**" Repent or die. But then comes the Gospel.

"The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, 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 had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." God's Word worked. The Word of the Lord brought salvation to the people of Nineveh. This is really the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah. It isn't Jonah being kept alive in the belly of a fish for 3 days. That same Word has changed your heart and mine. It did the impossible.

God's mercy is for all. He uses even an unwilling prophet to bring that message to others. The same gracious Lord who sought to bring the great city of Nineveh to repentance, who used the great wind to create the great storm that redirected Jonah, and who provided the great fish to return Jonah to his assigned task, remains great in mercy and compassion for us and others. Let us never fail to see this great God above all else in the work of Jesus Christ for us all. Amen.