



JONAH

pursued by grace

10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT NINEVEH

Sunday 28 August 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

>> *Read Jonah chapter 3.*

We've been working our way through the book of Jonah, and we come, now, to chapter three. And I've titled this sermon "10 things I hate about Nineveh". Nineveh was a great city but there was a lot not to like about it, so 10 things I hate about Nineveh:

Number one: they were an expansionary superpower. There's always been superpowers and some of them tend to bring about stability and peace; but Nineveh was one of those superpowers that tended to just take over everything. They were expansionary. They just swallowed up everything in their way. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria or Syria and was originally settled by Ashur, the second son of Shem, and it became this city-state that waxed and waned in power over many hundreds of years along with other Mesopotamian states like Babylon and so forth; but gradually they became the dominant power. They were polytheistic - they had over 2,000 gods - with the main god being Assure, but Dagon was a very important god as well.

They had done some great things too - they were a great city. They developed a major cuneiform library. They made Aramaic the language of the day. They even developed the Aramaic alphabet. They made developments in medicine. Some of the earliest written laws come from Assyria. Many zoos, botanical gardens; and, at their greatest extent, they covered most of Mesopotamia, the Middle East, down through Egypt. And this is what an artist's impression of what Nineveh might have looked like (see over). It was a great city, a huge city!



The second thing I hate about Nineveh is it developed a very advanced military. They were a very powerful military. They had very advanced tactics. They were the first to use iron weapons which were superior to bronze and easy to mass produce. And they excelled at siege warfare, so they were the first people to have an engineer corps as well.

The third thing I hate about Nineveh: they were vicious and cruel. This is what most people think of when they think of Assyria: they were vicious and cruel. They were a cruel nation in their warfare.

Number four: they were terrible to their captives, particularly those who were the leaders or those who resisted. They would flay them alive. They'd cut out their tongues. They lined the walls of the city with their skin. They were very cruel to their captives.

The fifth thing I hate about Nineveh: they invented impaling. What they do is they'd impale a number of their victims on poles and they'd have them lining the streets. And they'd line the walls of the streets with the skins so people could see that Nineveh had won this battle, Nineveh had taken over this people.

The sixth thing I hate about Nineveh is they boasted about their cruelty. You see, a lot of superpowers are cruel, but most of them tend to downplay it. They tend to deny it. But Nineveh boasted about it. If you look in the palaces of the kings, the artwork is pictures of impaled victims, pictures of people being flayed alive, people having their hands and feet chopped off. They boasted about their cruelty.

The seventh thing I hate about Nineveh: they developed a policy of cultural destruction of their enemies. When they took over a nation, they'd take the people and they'd scatter

them around the different places in Assyria. They'd send them wherever it was convenient, but in small groups, and they'd forbid them to follow their culture or their religion. Then they take other people from the empire and bring them in and repopulate the country they'd taken over with people from everywhere else. So they completely wiped out the cultures that they took over so that they couldn't rise up against them. They completely wiped them out.

The eighth thing I hate about Nineveh: they're into all kinds of sexual perversions, especially a number of their kings. I won't go into that because I don't want to lose our G rating on the Zoom...

The ninth thing I hate about Nineveh: they took all the wealth. They bled the nations dry that they took over.

And the tenth thing I hate about Nineveh is they were an existential threat to Israel. They were taking over all of Mesopotamia, they were heading down the Middle East, and it was almost a certainty that at some point they would take over and destroy the nation of Israel.

So, it's no wonder Jonah didn't like the city of Nineveh!

Interestingly, at the time of Jonah, the fortune of Assyria was on the downhill slide. Their fortunes were on the decline. Like with many expansionary powers, they tended to overstretch themselves and they had all sorts of economic struggles trying to keep those vast areas under subjugation. They'd overstretched militarily as well - the military was stretched far and wide and morale in the army was low at the time. Not only that, but the people of Ararat, who the Assyrians called the Aratu - a small nation - had managed to throw off the power of Assyria. It was the first time they'd been defeated! This small nation threw them off, so now other enemies were rising up and starting to sort of push back a bit.

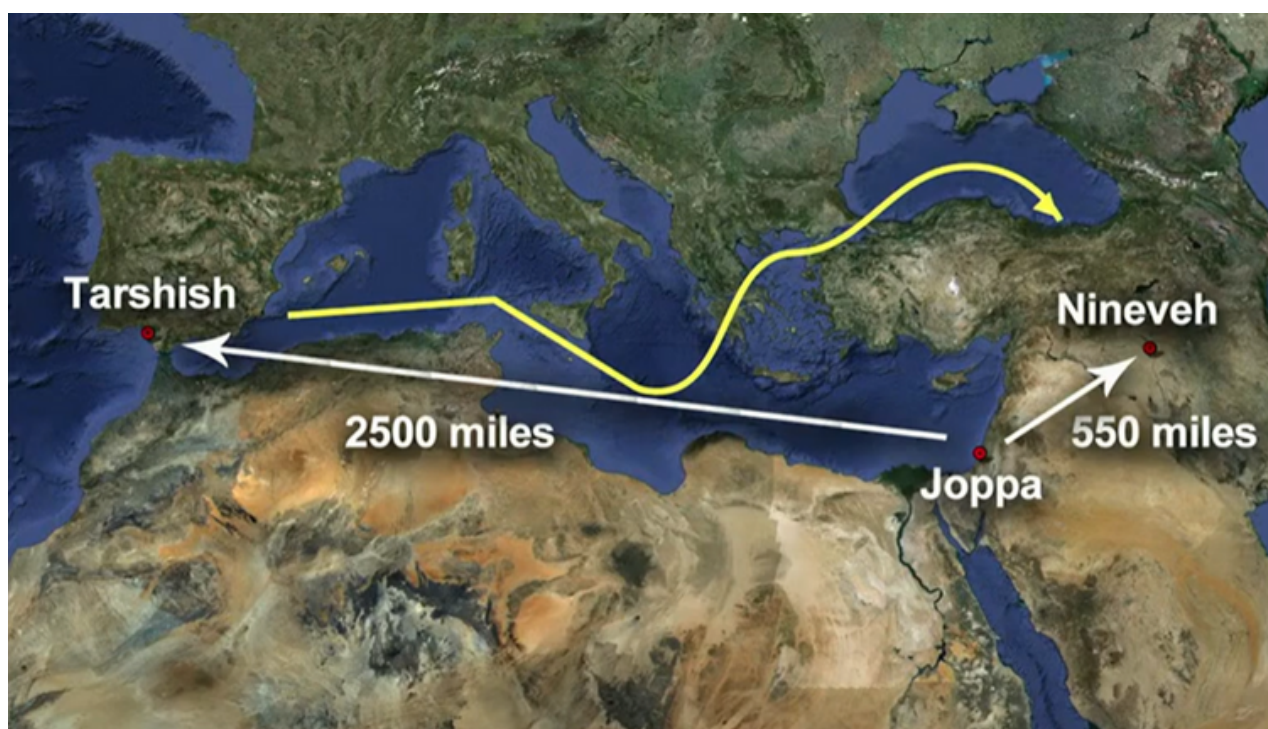
To make matters worse, the omens were bad. Assyria was a very superstitious nation. Like a lot of other powers in the day, they would read the omens before they went and did anything, and the omens were decidedly bad at this point. In 763BC, there was an eclipse of the sun. Now to you and me that's just an interesting astronomical phenomenon, but to them it was an omen of doom. In 759BC, a plague struck the nation and then four a few years later a second plague hit in 756BC. So, the omens were clearly bad at the time of Jonah.

And so, God gives the word to Jonah to go and preach to the city of Nineveh. But Jonah doesn't want to preach to Nineveh. He doesn't want Nineveh to receive grace and forgiveness. He wants them to come under judgment. So, he runs the other way and takes off to Tarshish and a big storm comes up and they throw him into the sea. As he sinks

down, a whale swallows him and brings him back to land and spits him back out. And so, we pick up the story in Jonah 3:1-3:

"Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. And then it was a very large city it took three days to go through it."

Something about getting thrown out of a boat, sinking down in the ocean, getting swallowed by a whale, and then spat up three days later caused Jonah to change his mind. And so, this time he goes to the city, and it takes him three days to go through Nineveh, preaching. In the book of Antiquities, Josephus, the great Jewish historian, says, "It's also related that Jonah was swallowed down by a whale and that when he'd been there three days and as many nights, he was vomited out upon the Euxine Sea and this alive without any hurt upon his body." The Euxine Sea is what we call the Black Sea so, forgive my artwork, but we heard that Jonah went to Joppa, caught the boat out to Tarshish, where he was thrown into the sea. There the whale swallowed him, and, over the next three days, the whale leisurely swam back through the Mediterranean Sea, up through the Dardanelles, through the Strait of Bosphorus, and dropped him out at the bottom of the Black Sea - which is just north of Nineveh - and spits him out on the land...



In verses 4 and 5: *"Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."*

So, Jonah walks from the north of Nineveh, into the city. He goes a day's journey in, preaching the word that God gave him: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Now the word at face value is that God is going to bring judgment on Assyria and Nineveh,

but there's an implied meaning in that God's giving them a warning here. There's a chance to repent. The implied implication here is unless they repent, unless they do something about it, it's an opportunity for Nineveh to turn, to repent. And what did the Ninevites do? The Bible says they believed God. Nineveh heard the word of God and they believed. What did they believe? Well, they believed that Jonah's God was the real God, Jonah's God was the God of the Hebrews, He was the actual God. See, they had over 2,000 gods as polytheists, but they believed that, actually, Jonah's God is the real God. And the second thing they believed is, if He is the real God, they were not right with Him: "We're not living right, we're not believing right..." They recognise that they weren't right with Jonah's God. And the third thing they believed is that there are consequences for not being right with God. In this case, judgment was coming. And so, they believed, and they humbled themselves before God, a fast was proclaimed, and all of them from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth. They repented before Jonah's God.

Some people say, "Well, how is it possible a whole city could repent, just at the preaching of one prophet?" It's interesting: God knows how to speak to each one of us. He knows how to get the message across so that we'll believe. See, not only was the fortunes of Assyria on the decline, not only were the omens bad, but one of the main gods Nineveh worshipped was Dagon. Dagon was this half-fish half-man who would come out of the sea and bring a message from the gods. So, when Jonah turns up out of the mouth of a whale, spat out of a mouth of the whale, and says, "Repent," they knew this was from God! They knew this was a word from God, spoken in just the way that they'd be able to hear it. It's interesting to look a little further down the history, another couple of hundred years after this. The Babylonians had a legend - this comes from Berossas, who's a Babylonian historian: he says, "In the very first year there appeared from the Red sea in an area bordering on Babylonia a frightening monster, known named Oannes [...]. It had the whole body of a fish, but underneath and attached to the head of the fish there was another head, human, and joined to the tail of the fish, feet, like those of a man, and it had a human voice. Its form has been preserved in sculpture to this day." It's interesting this legend developed of this half-fish half-man who would come out of the sea and bring the word from god, and the Babylonians named him 'Oannes'. In Hebrew, Jonah is 'Joannas' with a 'J', but the Babylonians didn't have a 'J' in their alphabet, so they called him 'Oannes'. So, God got the message to the Ninevites in just the way that they would understand it, and they repented.

Verses 6-9: "When Jonah's warning 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. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: do not let people animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

So Ashur-dan hears this this message. He hears that a man has come out of the mouth of a fish on the north shores of his kingdom and walked in preaching that God is going to destroy Nineveh. He knew what the omens were saying. And so, Ashur-dan himself believed. He believed and he calls a major fast. He says, "Let's all just fast. Let's cover ourselves with sackcloth. Let's pray to God because, who knows? Just maybe he'll forgive us and turn from this destruction of our city." So, the people of Nineveh repented.

Verse 10: *"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."*

The very thing Jonah most feared, happened: God forgave them! God turned and had mercy on them! But Jonah didn't want God to forgive them. Jonah thought they deserved judgment. These people are too wicked, they should be judged... And what's God do? He forgives them. In fact, just to steal a little bit from Lisa's thunder in two-weeks' time, Jonah 4:11 says, *"Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left - and also many animals?"*

God says, "Yes, they're wicked. Yes, they are evil. But they haven't got a clue. They don't know their right hand from their left. They're clueless." (In fact, I was going to call this sermon "Clueless", but I thought "10 things I hate about Nineveh" was more catchy...")

See, Jonah's view of grace was limited. Grace only went so far for Jonah and Nineveh was beyond his idea of grace, they were beyond, they were too bad. But God's grace is limitless. God's grace never ends. It just keeps going. See, Jonah's problem, why he couldn't forgive Nineveh in a worldly sense, is because they were a wicked race. They were a cruel race. They were vicious. They were his country's arch enemies. They were probably going to destroy his country. It's obvious why he couldn't forgive them.

But spiritually it goes deeper than that. Jonah's real problem was that he hadn't understood God's grace and mercy toward him and his nation. See, the Israelites were God's chosen race and they tended to think that made them better than everyone else. They tended to think that was because they were spiritually better. But God didn't choose them because they were better. He chose them out of His grace and mercy. If Jonah had understood the depth of God's love and grace and mercy toward him and Israel, he would have found it a lot easier to extend that grace to others as well.

I wonder who's beyond our grace limit? Who's just that step too far for us in terms of grace? I wonder if we consider ourselves beyond the grace limit ourselves? Maybe we think we're too bad to be forgiven... But God's grace is limitless. It's limitless. God offers grace to all. He offers it freely. His grace goes further than anyone's. His grace goes further than we are comfortable with. He extends grace to all, but He doesn't force anyone

to receive it. It has to be received...

Will you receive God's grace today? It has to be received. But He won't force you to receive it...

Well, after Jonah we don't have any record outside the Bible of the Ninevites' repentance. Now the Bible's a great historical record, so we do have historical records; but what we do have outside the Bible is a record of their fortunes reversing completely again, from going down and down and down to, after Jonah, they suddenly went up and up and up again. But sadly, their repentance only lasted a generation. By the next generation they were back to their evil ways again and, forty years later, the thing Jonah really feared did happen: they took over the northern kingdom of Israel. They carted the people off. They destroyed the culture. They brought a whole lot of mishmash of other people back to the northern kingdom of Israel, and those people became the despised Samaritans. So God sent another prophet, Nahum, to preach to Nineveh. But this time they didn't repent and something like a hundred years after Jonah, Nabopolassar of Babylon came in and laid siege to the city and he destroyed it so thoroughly that until 1847 Nineveh was considered a fictitious city. It was one of the 'evidences' that the Bible wasn't true because there was no physical evidence of the city of Nineveh. In fact, Xenophon marched his army over the top of it in 400BC and didn't know it was there. Alexander the Great camped there in a few of his campaigns and didn't even realise it was there. Then in 1847 archaeologists discovered the city and dug it up from under two hills and one of the hills is called 'Nebi Yunus' - 'the hill of Jonah' - just outside of modern-day Mosul in Iraq.

So, we've been looking at the book of Jonah and considering it from the perspective of Jonah who was called to go and preach to Nineveh, and he ran away from his call, and we've been asking the question: "Are we fulfilling our call?" But I want to look at it from a slightly different perspective. I want to look at it from one of the ways the New Testament interprets Jonah, typologically. Typology refers to when a person or event, usually from the Old Testament, foreshadows a person or an event in the New Testament. It's using past history to foreshadow future history, so only God can do it because to make a type you have to know what the future is going to be and then you have to be able to control history so that it'll foreshadow future history. It happens all the time through the Bible. You remember when they left Egypt, they had to paint the blood of the lamb over the door, and if they had the blood of the lamb over the door they would be spared from the angel of death? That was history as they left Egypt foreshadowing future history when Jesus would give His life and we could be covered with the blood of the lamb. See how God uses history to foreshadow history?

Even Jesus interprets Jonah typologically. Kieran talked about this two weeks ago in Matthew 12:39-41: "He answered, *"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except for the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days*

and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here."

So, Jonah is a type or a picture of Israel and also a type or a picture of Jesus. A lot of types do that: they'll take Israel and Jesus because Jesus is the true Israelite who fulfilled what Israel should be. Nineveh is a type of the nations or the gentiles. The storm is a type of judgment, a metaphor a picture of judgment. The whale is a type of death. And so, typologically, Jonah was called to go to Nineveh, even so Israel was called to be a light unto the gentiles. But Jonah refused to do it, just as Israel failed to be a light to the world, they failed in that purpose. So, a storm comes to Jonah, he came under judgment just as Israel was under judgment for failing in their purpose, as was the whole world under judgment. But then the true Israelite, Jesus, steps in. Jonah gets cast out of the sea and drowned, even so Jesus was put to death on a cross. He took the storm upon Himself on that cross. He took the penalty, the punishment for sin. The storm of judgment came upon Him, and He gave His life on the cross to pay for that judgment. Then Jonah went down into the belly of the whale for three days, even so Jesus went into the tomb and for three days and three nights. He was dead, but Jonah was spat up on the shore out of the whale, even so Jesus rose from the dead to show that He paid the full price for sin, and He'd risen to a new life and He offers us new life. And then Jonah went into Nineveh to preach to the gentiles, even so Jesus has become a light to the gentiles and offered His grace and mercy to the world. That's the typological interpretation.

The interesting question is: where do we fit into that? Oh dear, we're the Ninevites! We're the despised Ninevites. We're the ones for whom Jonah considered were beyond grace. We're the ones who Jonah considered shouldn't be forgiven. And yet God's grace went that far. God's grace went that far. They weren't beyond the bounds of God's grace. God offers His grace to each one of us each, no matter how bad you think you are or what you've done or how bad people have told you - God's grace is there for you! His love is there for you. His mercy, His forgiveness is there for you. Will you receive God's grace today?

God's grace is freely available, but it needs to be received.

And do we limit God's grace for others? Do we have limits to our grace to how far we think grace should go? I know some people have some things that might be hard to forgive and hard to extend grace. And I think for those people the trick is to do what Jonah didn't do: meditate on God's grace towards you. Meditate on God's grace. Learn and know and understand how deep His love is for you, how far His mercy goes towards you, and as you do that it will naturally flow out. And then, as we've been saying, our calling is to share that grace with the world. Are we fulfilling that calling? Are we taking that grace out to the

world?

I'm going to pray. I wonder if there's anyone here who has never received God's grace in their life and maybe today is the day? If you need to receive it for the first time, if that's you, I'm going to pray for you and I want you to pray along with me - and then I'll pray for us all:

"Dear Lord Jesus. We just thank you so much that, 2,000 years ago, you went to the cross and you took the storm of judgment that belonged to us. You took upon yourself all of our sin, all of my sin, and all of everyone's sin. And Father, I pray that you will extend that grace and forgiveness to me, and we just receive that grace now, in the name of Jesus. I thank you that you died for me. I thank you that you paid the price for my sin. I thank you that you love me. I thank you that you rose from the dead and you offer me a whole new life in Jesus. We receive that life. We receive that grace right now and I thank you for that grace, in Jesus' name.

"And I pray for all of us here that you'll give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation that we may know the height and the depth and the breadth of the love that you have for us, in Jesus. I pray that you'll help us to know the height and the depth and the breadth of the mercy and forgiveness and grace you offer to each one of us. That we may know that we know that we know that we're loved, we're forgiven, and we are a treasured part of your family. And Father I pray that that love and that grace may so fill us that it overflows to all those around us, that we may offer grace and mercy to all, knowing that your grace is limitless. And I pray, too, that you'll help us, Lord, to fulfill our calling of being bearers of that light and that grace to the world. Help us to take part in that great plan, to share the grace and the love of Jesus with the world. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen."