

Jonah 3:1-10

God's Word Works Powerfully on Any Sinful Heart

You can find them online in article with titles like “6 bar bets you’ll always win.” Have you ever seen these? They’re these scenarios which when you explain them don’t sound possible. And so you bet the person you’ll be able to do what seem impossible. You cut a hole in a piece of paper the size of dime and bet you can pass a nickel through it without tearing the paper. Or tell the person to pull out a coin and hold it tightly in their hand and you’ll tell them the date. Or set a full glass and an empty glass next to each other and claim you can make half the liquid transfer without touching the glass or the liquid, using nothing more than a straw which won’t ever touch your mouth. Of course there’s always a gimmick to do the seemingly impossible. With that last one for example, you simply fill a bent straw with water and by placing it in both glasses, it creates a syphon which will pull half the liquid out without you touching the glass or the liquid.

I wonder how many bets God could win with what we’re talking about this morning. God tells us his Word has the power to work on any and every sinful heart. And skeptics the world over say, Yeah, right! That will never work. Some old stories and some clichés? You think that can change anyone’s heart. Even God’s own people aren’t free from the temptation to doubt that God’s Word really has the power to change sinful human hearts.

Yet that’s precisely what we see this morning in Jonah 3...God’s Word working powerfully on any sinful heart...be it openly wicked nations or reluctant prophets.

Now if you could have talked to the prophet Jonah during those weeks when he was called to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, I think he would have been incensed at what I just said... putting him in the same category as the Ninevites...sinners upon whom the powerful Word of God goes to work. And at first glance, some might agree.

After all, Nineveh was the capital Assyria. Assyria was the mightiest nation in the world in Jonah’s time, 750 years before Jesus. And they were renowned for their cruelty and wickedness. The entire history of Assyria is filled with violence and terror. They were a warring nation who prided themselves on their military might and their iron-fisted rule. One way they accomplished that was through exceptionally cruel and barbaric practices. Assyrian kings would customarily bring the severed head of a recently conquered king home and raise it on a pole in the midst of the royal banquet commemorating his victory. Bon appétit, right! And after the banquet it would be placed over the gate of Nineveh where it slowly rotted away. Enemy kings weren’t the only one either. One account recalls in horror that “*the Elamite general, Dananu, was flayed alive*” (that was a specialty of the Assyrians which they had perfected...keeping the subject alive through the whole

process). And once these heinous atrocities had been committed, they were boldly displayed in prominent and public artwork to instill fear for all who gazed upon them.

It's no surprise God told Jonah in chapter 1 that the Ninevites wickedness had risen up before him. They were more concerned with instilling fear in others than they were with fearing the almighty God of the universe. It's also no surprise that the message Jonah brought was an unpleasant one, **Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!** If ever there was a city so unworthy of redemption and a civilization so deserving of destruction, Nineveh was it. And that's precisely what the Lord proclaimed he was going to do.

So why didn't God just destroy them without warning like he did to Sodom and Gomorrah? Why did he send Jonah? Because **Nineveh was a great city to God.** Great to God in the sense it was big, yes. But the size of the city made it great to God in another sense. The bigger the city, the more precious souls living within its walls. As he would tell Jonah in chapter 4, though they deserved destruction, Nineveh was a city of thousands of people ...people created by God...people whom God longed for even in their rebellion. And so while their destruction was deserved, destruction was not what God desired. So God sent the messenger with a message intended to do one thing...humble them in fear...but not in the same way their propaganda artwork did. Rather to bring them to repentance.

That's what God desired. That's what God's gracious love desires even for the worst of sinners. Repentance. And that's exactly what happen in Nineveh.

In English, it's a 10 word sermon. In Hebrew it's even shorter...only 5 words. **Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!** I think I might have been tempted to think, "Lord, that's not going to work." No one will listen. They'll just dismiss me as a crazy person. They'll just laugh me off the street corner. A temptation that so often hinders our proclamation. A temptation that ultimately stems from not believing God's Word has the power to work on any sinful heart.

But God demonstrates the foolishness of such sinful thinking. **The men of Nineveh believed God.** That powerful Word of condemnation moved them to true repentance which took God seriously when he says, "I cannot tolerate your sin." It worked powerfully to move them to true repentance which knows one's place before God...sinners deserving his destroying condemnation. That was what their actions showed. **They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least.** No longer indulging in the pleasures of life as they contemplated how they had angered the holy God. Outwardly putting on garments of lowliness that reflected the humbled state of their hearts before God's law.

It was genuine repentance. And genuine repentance also looks to God for mercy. And that's exactly what they got. **Who knows? God may turn and relent. He may turn from his burning anger so that we will not perish. When God saw their**

actions, that they had turned from their evil way, God relented from the disaster which he said he would bring on them, and he did not carry it out.

But they weren't the only sinful hearts upon which the powerful Word of God went to work. Notice how our reading began. **The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time.** You probably know exactly why he had to be called twice. Because the first time, Jonah did not set out and do just as the word of the LORD commanded. He ran. The opposite direction. He tried to outrun the God who fills everything and is present everywhere. But God wouldn't let him. A great storm hampered the progress of the ship he was on and once Jonah told the sailors why, they begrudgingly fulfilled his request to throw him overboard. God then sent a great fish to swallow Jonah up and save him from the watery depths. For three days inside the belly of that fish he had time to think about what he'd done, to think about God's salvation in saving him.

Why did Jonah run in the first place? Not because he was scared. He ran because he was pretty sure he knew what God really wanted...not destruction, but mercy. And he was pretty sure God's message WOULD work. And wanted no part of that.

You see, in addition to the hatred evoked by their cruelty, Assyria was also the nation God, through men like Isaiah, had already announced would be his chosen instrument to bring destruction upon the northern kingdom of Israel. God wanted Jonah to unleash his powerful Word and preach to a nation that would destroy his brothers and sisters in the not too distant future. Jonah hated them. In his mind, they didn't deserve God's mercy.

And that made him a sinner with a sinful heart in need of God's powerful Word. And it was God's powerful Word called to mind through the condemning actions of the storm and the sea...through the rescue of the fish...and the time of contemplation in the darkness...which worked powerfully on the sinful heart of Jonah so that when God said, **Get up, go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."**...Jonah set out and went to Nineveh just as the word of the LORD had commanded

It's an amazing story of God's grace. And it's our story. But who are we in this story? Are you more like Jonah? Or more like the Ninevites? Probably a little bit of both, right?

We can see a lot of ourselves in the Ninevites. People living in a prosperous nation. So often concerning ourselves not with how we stand before God, but with how we can further our own agendas. So often living without a proper fear of God, imaging him little more than a projection of own desiring who lets us do what we want, when we want. Like them, our wicked indifference to God's will comes up before him like a stench.

But can see a lot of ourselves in Jonah too, can't we. Sinners who have mercifully been brought to restoration with our God, but who for some reason still find reasons to look down at others as less worthy of that same grace. Sinners who also have been called to proclaim God's grace to an unbelieving world but who often spurn that call, replacing it with a healthy dose of self-righteous smugness toward those WE have deemed unworthy.

God would have us be brought low in repentance too...like a people dressed in sackcloth and a prophet sitting in the belly of a fish, he would have us spent time this morning taking him seriously. And he uses his powerful Word to do it. He will not accept indifference and self focused lives. He would have us spend time this morning remembering our place. That we are not favored because we are more deserving than others...we are sinners just like the rest of the world...deserving his wrath and punishment. He would have our hearts be humbled before his powerful law.

All for the same reason he did for Nineveh and Jonah too. So that he might unleash the power of his gospel and have mercy on us. And in this God's grace is revealed in our lives like it did in the lives of thousands of Ninevites and in the life of a runaway prophet. The king of Nineveh asked, **Who knows? God might relent.** We know. Because God's powerful Word reveals exactly how and why our God has relented from the disaster we deserve for both our rebellion and our self-righteousness. Not because we've brought him something he can accept, but because his Son has.

Jesus was the only prophet who truly could have looked at the world and said, I'm not like you. You deserve exactly what you have coming. He's the one prophet who was not one sinner among others. But he came proclaiming a forgiveness that knows no bounds or limits...is not dependent on the worth of the recipient...but is for all and freely given to all. Because it came at the price of his own perfect life and his own innocent death. Forgiveness for open wickedness. Forgiveness for self-righteousness. Forgiveness for all the times we doubt the power of his Word.

Friends, remember the story of Jonah and Nineveh. Remember the powerful Word of God that worked in spite of reluctant prophets...in spite of open wickedness. Remember the powerful Word of God at work on your own sinful heart. And trust its power. Trust that God's law can work on the most stubborn hearts. Trust that the powerful Word of God can reach that friend or family member you've considered giving up on. Trust that the powerful Word of God will continue to reveal the grace of God found in his Son, our Savior. And rejoice that we have such a God who has given us such a powerful Word. For in choosing us to proclaim his Word, such weak and frail and unworthy representatives, he reveals its power and reality of his grace.

There's no gimmicks or parlor tricks here. God's Word works powerfully and that's a promise. May we proclaim that Word with such confidence and boldly unleash that power for the salvation of souls. Amen.