

Reading: Jonah 3:1-10

Theme: The Message that changed everything.

It is strange what and who people will believe. Tell people the sun is 93 million miles away and they will believe it; put up a sign on a newly painted bench saying "Wet Paint" and people just have to touch it to see if it is true! Nowadays, people believe social media rather than experts and conspiracy theories are more exciting than boring factual research! Perhaps we notice it with children, as parents say something and it is doubted, but if their friends say it, then it must be true!

Jonah was given the job of going to Nineveh, not to entertain it, or sightsee, but to preach to it. What good could one man do with a message which the people would not want to hear, coming from a God they did not know or acknowledge? We can compare Jonah's task to one of us being sent to a Taliban stronghold and expecting them and all their territory to renounce their murderous campaign, to turn from Islam and to turn to Jesus! Yet we shall see in this chapter this is the equivalent of what happened as Jonah went in obedience to God's word to proclaim to Nineveh what the Lord God of Israel wanted him to proclaim. Let's see 2 things:

1. Jonah's message (v4)

Jonah came to the great capital of the Assyrian Empire - Nineveh, and he did not put off his important duty, but started straight away to proclaim the message God gave him. We need to realise God was determined Nineveh

should hear the message. God took great pains and care in getting His servant Jonah not only there, but suited and equipped to preach this message. Jonah alone was God's choice to bring this message and the message is summarised in just eight words. Whether that was the full extent of Jonah's message, or the essence of it we are not told. It was not a long, complicated message, but was simple and clear; yet it was an important message they needed to hear.

The gospel is important for people to hear and it is also simple - there is a God to whom we must all give an account of our lives and unless we meet His holy perfect standard, He will have to judge us and condemn us to eternal punishment in hell. Not one person matches up to His standard and therefore we have in and of ourselves no hope. Thankfully and incredibly, God has provided the way through which we can be welcomed and accepted by Him – God the Son took all our wrong, our guilt and punishment in our place and when we believe in Him as our own Saviour all His righteousness (*i.e. God's perfect standard*) is forever given, credited to us and therefore God can accept us. Have we believed the gospel? Is this Saviour ours? If so, do we seek to tell others? We do not have to be eloquent, able, clever and intellectual speakers; but do we tell the gospel message to others so that they may know the love of God in Jesus Christ? This is something we are to desire to do.

Jonah proclaimed a message. AV says "*he cried and said*" - it indicates he called out in an agony, in an awareness of

the truth of the message he was proclaiming. It wasn't said in a cold matter-of-fact way, but it affected him deeply because he believed it and knew the awesomeness of his God. We are to believe what we say as we seek to reach out to tell people of the Lord Jesus. Jonah didn't offer it apologetically *"Oh I have to say this; I don't really believe it though, because it is not nice!"* No, he spoke as one knowing the terror of the Lord, knowing that although his message was simple it was nevertheless the truth of God and it was urgent and serious.

Jonah was not ashamed of the message, even though he knew his God was not the fashion of the day, nor the "in" idea at Nineveh, but he proclaimed the message, for he was not ashamed of his God. Even if he feared the people, he boldly proclaimed God's word in the city. He was not ashamed of the message as he was persuaded that what he said was true. Are we persuaded, convinced that God and God's word is true and trustworthy? Many are not and so they do not preach the things they feel might upset or offend people - topics like hell, judgement, the wrath of God, the eternity of the suffering of the lost, the need for repentance - all are ignored, or silently side-lined in their preaching. If the Bible is the word of God, then we need to believe it and preach it. If we deny the reality of hell, the eternal suffering of the lost, then in essence we are calling the Lord Jesus a liar, for it was He, the manifestation of the love of God, who spoke the most on hell, its awful reality and sufferings.

The gospel tells us there is a wonderful heaven to be gained, full of joys, delights, pleasures that are as yet unknown, but as we have eternal life through faith in Jesus, we also know something of the enjoyment of such in this life. The gospel also warns that if we do not turn to God, call on Him to save us, we are heading to hell, a place of awful, indescribable agony, suffering and torment, where God's anger will never cease against us for our sin and our foolish or stubborn refusal to trust the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. God asks people "*Why will you die?*" He offers life and eternal life, instead of eternal death and so we are to choose life. As Jonah proclaimed this message, the people responded and so we see:

2. The effect of Jonah's preaching. (v5-9)

Jonah's message was solemn, but why was it the Ninevites believed it and it affected them in such a way? We do not read that they believed Jonah, but "*believed God*". This simple, clear message was used by God to bring the people, from the down and outs, to the high ups and royalty, to repentance. We have to say it was of God. Instead of mocking, ignoring this one as a crank, as a fanatic; instead of being offended and maltreating him, they heard what he said and it affected them in 3 main ways:

a. There was conviction: they were convinced that what Jonah said was of God, that God was justifiably angry with them and this threat was no bluff, but real and in 40 days they would be destroyed by the Lord, the God of Jonah. Jonah was not treated as a crazy man, but what he said was

viewed as God saying it to the people. Why was this? What was it that marked Jonah out as authentic? In Luke 11 we read of Jonah being a sign to the Ninevites - his three days and nights in the stomach of the fish was a sign to them. I have said previously that no doubt his skin, hair would have been affected and bleached by the stomach acids of the fish; perhaps Jonah spoke of his original commission, his fleeing away, God causing the storm etc. Without this knowledge of his history, he could not have been a sign to them, just an object of curiosity. As he could well have spoken of God's control of the elements, being in the fish, he would have impressed them with a sense of the power of the Lord, His requirements and His wrath.

Yet even as Jonah was a sign of God's wrath, he was also a sign of God's love and mercy - that rebels who do wrong and wickedness can be spared, can be forgiven and used by God. This message of the sense of God's wrath, coupled with a sense of awe and fear of God, gripped and took hold of the Ninevites. They came to realise as he spoke, that they had a case to answer to this awesome and living God.

Have we ever seen we have a case to answer to this holy, Almighty God? What would we say in our defence? How do we imagine we will plead on the day of our trial? There is only one possible plea, as all the evidence will be presented against us and we will have to own we are guilty. If we've never done it before, we should ask God to show us our guilt now, before it comes to trial, so we can make our peace with Him before it is too late. But see also:

b. There was sorrow: they were not just terror struck, but were brought to grief for their wrongdoing and they wore sackcloth and fasted. There was deep sorrow caused by this conviction, by this terror of having offended God. In our lives have we ever known something of what it is like to fear God because He is holy and we are not? Have we then been sorry for our sin and told God so (*repentance*)? Have we seen our wrongdoing as an offence to Him, and not merely because it has consequences in our lives?

God used this fear to bring them to sorrow for their wrong, to bring them to faith and yet even this faith was a gift from God in His love and mercy. God can use different ways to bring a person to faith. When we see of the love of God as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, faith is active in us through love; perhaps some of us saw the wrath of God and we, in terror and fear, fled to Christ for safety and refuge – in this, faith worked through fear; perhaps we saw the love of God shown in the Lord Jesus Christ bearing the wrath of God and we were grieved that "*there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin*" - then faith worked by grief. We could go on and see faith working through humbling our pride, by showing pride's vain hope, by showing us our folly, our sinfulness etc. We are to realise God can use many ways to bring us to faith, yet such faith is the gift of God. We need to ask God to give us faith, to bring us to faith, even saying "*we do believe, help our unbelief*".

We need to face the fact that without God we will perish for ever and it should cause us to fear, sorrow and turn to God in repentance. The Ninevites were deeply affected by fear, by sorrow and they showed it for:

c. There was changed behaviour: this realisation of God, His anger against them caused not just sorrow, but it affected their attitude, behaviour and outlook. No longer could they be happy and content to live as they pleased; no longer were they able to ignore the living God, but from top to bottom, or rather the bottom to the top of society all were affected. They mourned and fasted. Even the king proclaimed a time of national mourning and for the people to call urgently upon God. We would find it incredible, staggering if our local MP, the local council leaders issued a byelaw and order to call upon God in such a way, so that He would be merciful to Doncaster and South Yorkshire.

Amazingly God has done such things in times past - we speak of revivals, where God has come down in a mighty way and not just church people are affected, but the society around them. Yes, many are converted; it is true others are caught up on the bandwagon and are not converted, but are affected, for God had come down on a district, town or village and lives and behaviour were altered. I feel this may have occurred here. Many came to trust God on an individual basis, others were profoundly affected and the whole city was touched by an awareness of God, of His holiness and power.

It is important that we are not just touched by God, or affected by the religious, the happy or solemn atmosphere in the church, but that we, as individuals, whether we are young or old, we would seek to be right personally with God, for this alone is what counts. In hell there are many who have been affected, even by revivals, by the great preaching of great preachers, there in hell will be those who were preachers, ministers, elders, deacons, the children and grandchildren of famous men and women of God, yet they never had a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus and assumed that their feelings, their niceness, their relationship with other Christians would do.

Each one of us needs to not only to have feared God, to have sorrowed for our sin, to have changed behaviour show in our lives, but to have to have gone to God in repentance and belief and to have trusted the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour. The Ninevites had something of the first three, but many of them also went on to have a living hope in God. We will look at this in more detail next time as we return to the book of Jonah, but I pray we would all know this God as our own God by coming to Him through the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour.