

Reading: Jonah 3:1-10

Theme: Hope for the hopeless.

Last week as we looked at this chapter, we saw **1. Jonah's Message** (v4) - that it was a solemn, clear and important message from God and the people received it as not from a crank, but from God. We then noted **2. The Effect of Jonah's Preaching** (v5-9) - there was **conviction** for they realised they had offended this God; there was **sorrow** and it was not just sorrow at being found out, but because they had offended this God and they owned it; as they repented, we also saw there was **changed behaviour** and they could not continue as they had previously; even the king issued an edict for everyone to mourn and to call urgently upon God. I tried to apply this to our lives and situations and encouraged us to consider if we faithfully proclaim God's word or if the word of God has had any effect on us in our lives. We touched on how God has worked in amazing ways in revivals and how whole towns, cities and lands have been affected as His word has been preached and applied powerfully by the work of the Holy Spirit.

We noted that the whole city of Nineveh was touched by an awareness of God, of His holiness and power, of the judgement they deserved which they had been told would come upon them in a relatively short time. Yet their actions, sorrow, changed behaviour, fasting and praying are not the marks, works or attitudes of those who only saw the imminent wrath of God upon them, a wrath that must have caused them to despair at ever escaping God's judgement,

yet they saw something more – more incredible and so we see:

3. The message of hope in Jonah's preaching.

These marks, attitudes and actions show they had seen in Jonah's message a clear note of hope. You may question that, as you take a look at the severity of Jonah's message, for it seems to leave no glimmer of hope. Yes, the message in v4 does indeed seem to be a message of hopelessness; may seem to be uncompromising; leaving no room for any hope; but there was something more that not only caused the Ninevehites to believe God, but also to expect a stay of execution in the sentence proclaimed. In v9 the king expressed this after declaring a fast, a calling upon God, a forsaking of evil and violence - as he had a hope that God in His compassion may turn from His fierce anger against them. Why was it that they thought God may have relented? On the face of it they were left with no chance, their case seemed hopeless. Why then did they entertain this notion, this idea of hope, of mercy? It was not an idea based on their own religion or behaviour. Archaeology shows us something of the barbarity of the Assyrians, especially the barbarity of their kings, who would have no qualms about cutting off the noses of the people they conquered, or skinning them alive and especially cruel treatments were reserved for conquered royal households and the priests of the conquered nation's gods. So how did this hope rise in the hearts and minds of the king and the people? I feel there were two reasons why the Ninevehites had a glimpse and gleaning of hope:

a. There was a warning given.

When people fail to pay their gas, electric or phone bill, for whatever reason – the bill put down and forgotten, or deliberately ignored, then eventually a red warning letter is sent to say that unless the bill is paid, the service will be cut off in so many days. The threat is a warning of the intended action if certain conditions are not met - the warning given enables the people to avoid that action being taken. We have the same with our bodies - some aches and pains are a sign that something is not right and our body is alerting us to take action before it is too late. Here in the church if the fire alarm goes off, and is not an alarm test or practice run, it means that we have opportunity to escape and to avoid the fire it warns of. We are used to a warning normally meaning an opportunity to escape the consequences.

Here I feel the inhabitants of Nineveh saw Jonah's preaching as the same, that God the Lord was giving them a warning to avoid the destruction of the city. If God had decided to finally destroying Nineveh once and for all, then why give a warning; why give 40 days' grace and then Nineveh would be destroyed? He could have destroyed it as He did Sodom and Gomorrah. It would have been an unnecessary waste of energy, effort and care to warn Nineveh of the coming destruction through Jonah and his ministry if there was no way it could be avoided. They Ninevites reasoned the announcement was given so they could repent, turn from their evil violence and be spared!

God's preparation of and sending of Jonah as a preacher to them was a mercy - to tell them of the judgement and allow them to turn away from evil and call on God. No message was sent to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah to warn them of their destruction. Only Lot was warned of its destruction by the angels and when he sent to his sons-in-law to warn them, they mocked and did not believe him. The people of those cities were condemned, no city-wide warning was given and they were destroyed.

The Ninevites must have reasoned in this way - if God wanted, He could have destroyed us out of hand, without any warning. Surely if He has sent to warn us, there must be a hope of escape, for He has given us 40 days notice. Therefore, there must be room for hope, for escape, to allow us to turn to Him and call on Him to spare us, there seemed to be this hope of pardon in their minds. Yes, they acknowledged what they deserved, that they were guilty, they deserved this foretold punishment and they made no excuses, but as they mourned, repented and gave up their evil and violence, they cast themselves upon God and His mercy. His warning gave them hope of His mercy, His longsuffering and patience. I also feel that they derived hope from:

b. Jonah's deliverance.

We are told in Luke 11 that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevehites, that his being in the fish for three days and three nights was a sign to them. It must mean that the people of Nineveh must have been aware of the history of Jonah -

his calling, his rebellion, his punishment, his restoration and his forgiveness. Without such knowledge he would have been a preacher, a weird looking preacher - bleached hair and skin, but not a sign. Despite himself, Jonah embodied, revealed the message that God is gracious and compassionate. This is what Jonah knew (4:2), but he did not want the Ninevehites to know it! Yet more than anything he said, he was a sign of God being gracious and compassionate, being full of grace. Every time the king of Nineveh and his people were sucked into the vortex of despair, one look at Jonah and they would be able to take heart, encouragement and hope that this is not a cruel God, but the gracious God of mercy and compassion.

They must have reasoned that surely Jonah deserved to be destroyed after such wilful disobedience, such headstrong running from the Lord he knew. Yet they were ignorant of the Lord and His holy law and ways. Yes, they were guilty, yet Jonah had not been ignorant of the Lord, but the Lord had forgiven, restored and spared him. He had humbled himself and prayed to, called on God. The king and all in Nineveh did the same *"Who knows? God may yet relent..."*(v9) - if it was possible for this awesome God to forgive and spare one like Jonah, then there was hope for them. If this Lord could give new life to the rebellious prophet who knew Him, then, if He were of a mind to, He could save a repentant city which was ignorant of Him and His ways.

What of us this evening? Are we aware that if we are not a Christian, through having a personal faith in the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour, we are now already under God's condemnation? The sword of His anger, wrath and punishment hangs over our head and its falling upon us in our execution is kept away only by our next breath and heartbeat. It could suddenly fall on us. Someone here or watching online may be aware of that. If so, then do not give up hope. No matter our life, whether we have been respectable or immoral, we all deserve this punishment from God, but there is hope. We cannot escape from God's judgement on our own, but the fact we are hearing of God's love and mercy, to hear that with Him there is forgiveness to be found, that God is *"not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9) should be to us an encouragement of hope and to hope expectantly for good from this God.

Yes, God is the God who will judge all who do not repent and believe on the Lord Jesus, which includes any of us, but He is also the God who has demonstrated His love to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, on our behalf, in our place and took our punishment. He died, was buried, was in the grave three days and three nights and yet He was raised up again never more to die and is able to save to the uttermost all who go to Him i.e. for ones such as us. In fact, we need to recognise we have been spared all the days of our life until now and that this is a sign of God's mercy to us. He demands that we repent or we will perish eternally if we do not.

We are to take heart, for if we feel we are not good enough, or too bad, then we can look at living trophies of His grace and mercy here in this church. Can He save? We answer “Yes”. Will He accept us even though we feel vile, rotten and know our wrong before Him? Again, we answer “Yes”, 1000 times “Yes”. All who go to Him will never be turned away; for going to Him we cast ourselves on His love, mercy and grace and we do not try to justify ourselves by His law, or by our feelings or even by our morality or goodness. With God there is an infinite ocean of His grace, big enough for the worst person who has ever lived to be forgiven totally and yet that same ocean is necessary for the most religious and respectable person to go and dive into as well. All of us need to go to God and to cast ourselves on His grace and mercy as revealed in His salvation plan through the Lord Jesus.

If we do not know the Lord Jesus as our Saviour, then we need to trust Him as our Saviour – even this evening. It will mean we have to mourn and grieve over our sin; to cry out to God for mercy, yet He is able to save and forgive all who do so – it is guaranteed by His word. We are not look to our own goodness, morality or religiousness, nor any religious rites or rituals done to us at whatever age, but we, even as nice people, still need to trust in the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour and rely on no good things we feel we have. Then instead of being condemned, we will receive eternal life, a new life, be born again of God and know His love and care all the days of life.

When we do that, then there is no destruction to fear. The Ninevehites were spared as v10 says *"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 threatened."* This is not God changing His mind or being fickle. Not at all, this is what He intended all along in sending the prophet Jonah to preach to them – His secret will. This was part of God's eternal purpose. One day, if we are believers, we will meet some of these people from Nineveh in heaven and it will be great to hear how they came to trust in the living God. In one sense the Nineveh that God had sent Jonah to, had been destroyed, it was no longer in existence. Yes, all the buildings and the people all looked the same, but it was now a totally different place - they were now a humble, God-fearing and praying people and not the careless, violent evildoers and, most importantly, God had spared them.

I pray that we would all know God's love in sparing us, that we would be new creatures in Christ and the old will be passed away and that we would go on to not only live for God, but to enjoy His ongoing love, care and peace in our daily lives as we would want to cause others to think more highly of Him and we would do all we can to live to please Him and show that we truly love Him.