

Jonah: Lessons from a man who Ran: Part Three: A Matter of great concern. Jonah Ch.3

We're in the third part of our series on Jonah:

- In the first two weeks we've talked about running from God.
- Today the story takes a very strange twist. So Turn to Jonah chapter 3

Before we start, let me put in a little disclaimer.

- If you're here today and you're not a church/religious person- today's message is a little bit embarrassing to those of us who are Christians.
- Because one of the things you've never liked about church is that you've always thought- 'it's full of hypocrites'.
- Well- after today- you might want to buy this CD and play it to your Christian friends and rehearse the "I told you so" speech.
- Because there's a little bit of Jonah in me!- There's probably a little bit of Jonah in all of us! **Ch 3:V.1**

Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time: [Good News- God isn't finished with Jonah]
"Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you." (3:1)

Remember Ninevah is one of Israel's national enemies.

This time Jonah obeyed the Lord's command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all. (3)

Now Ninevah was a very important city There were at least 120,000 people living there. A huge city for that day and age.

On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" (4)

So Jonah's like some sandwich board preacher "The end is Nigh!"

- How do you think people would respond to that? About the same way we would!
- But something strange is happening here- look at V5

The people of Nineveh believed God's message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow. (5)

When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes. Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city: (6-7)

- And his proclamation demanded that everyone fast and pray that God would relent and not judge their nation.
- **I think Jonah was shocked-** *"It worked?!- I'm Jewish- they don't know me from Adam- and I'm telling them about a God they don't worship- and it worked?!?"*

Now as unbelievable as this all sounds- we know from history that this really did happen!

- That's because during this period, three things happened that softened these people up for God's message.
- **The first thing-** during this time there was a total solar eclipse. In Jonah's day an eclipse was a very bad omen.
- **The second thing:** About 100 miles north of Ninevah, two or three tribes gathered together and began marauding through the land- taking over small town after small town and working their way south to Ninevah.
- **The third thing:** Within a five year period, there had been two severe plagues that killed hundreds if not thousands of people.
- **So by the time Jonah shows up-** God's already got their attention- and they believe this sandwich board prophet.

We learn a very important lesson there- that God's not paralysed by the mess of our world- He can use it to work behind the scenes.

- **That's good news** because there are people you and I know that we never invite to church because we think- "they're looking pretty secure- they're not interested- they're comfortable- They're Anti-faith!"
- **But the truth is** behind the scenes- God is there- using whatever he can to prepare somebody's heart.
- **And if you get a prompting** to talk to someone- that's because God's been doing some background work- so don't ignore God's nudge!
- **Think about your own story!** There was a time when most of us weren't interested- but God used circumstances to prepared us.

I remember praying for this guy at work when I was a bus electrician. There was another Christian in the works- and he'd been working on this guy! I was a bit zealous and I remember pleading with God to give me an opportunity. I was at the gunk tank the next day- washing off a starter motor- and this guy saunters up- and before I could say a word he said- tell me all about this Christianity thing!" I nearly fell in the tank.

- God works behind the scenes, preparing people's hearts.
- When you get an opportunity to share about faith- don't forget- you're not the only player on the field.

Now it would be great if this were the end of the story.

- Jonah learns- even after we've run- God has a purpose for us- Jonah discovers God works behind the scenes- so it's best to obey. Jonah's rescued- Ninevites are rescued- And they all lived happily ever after!
The end!
- But the story doesn't end there. It takes a very strange twist that God uses as a scalpel to open up my heart and maybe some of yours.
- Here's what happened:

When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened. (10)

- And we cry “Well done Jonah- for he’s a jolly good fellow!” **CH 4**

This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. (4:1)

- **Hang on Jonah-** You saved a nation- But Jonah is ticked off!
- And it’s here we discover why Jonah didn’t want to go to Ninevah in the first place & that he had incredible insight into the character of God.

So he complained to the Lord about it: “Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! (2)

- **He says-** “God- I knew you were going to do this!”
- **You see-** Jonah didn’t run from God because he was afraid of the Ninevites!
- **He ran because** he was afraid that God would act like God. He’s got perfect theology.
- **Just to put this in perspective-** we have parallels going on all the time in our culture.

If the head of Isis came forward and apologised- explained how they now understood the wrong they had done- Terrorism and violence disarmed and disbanded....there would be some people in America, in the UK, in Syria, in Libya- in this church- maybe in the music group...who would say- that’s not what we want to hear!

- Isn’t there a little bit of that in all of us! Well that’s how Jonah felt!
- “I prance in here and say repent- and now God’s just going to let them off!” (he’s steaming!)
- And Jonah makes this statement about what God’s really like-

I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unending love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. (2)

- “I knew you were that kind of God- and I’m mad!
- Now we all look at Jonah and we’re reaching for the counselling directory- “What’s his problem!”

Just kill me now, Lord! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.” (3)

- Do you know why he wants to die? Because he knows he can’t go home! If he goes home now- you can imagine the conversation.

“Jonah...Where’ve you been?”
 “Ninevah”-
 “What?! Ninevah! And you made it out alive? What happened?”
 “Well, God told me to tell them if they didn’t repent he’d wipe them out”
 “Well it’s about time! What happened?”
 I warned them...they repented...God’s given them more time”
 “You did what!”

- Jonah’s saying- “I can’t even go home! My life is over!”

- And God says to him what we'd expect.

The Lord replied, "Is it right for YOU to be angry about this?" (5)

- And the emphasis here is on the word YOU!
- "Jonah! Have YOU any right to be angry. You're right about me. I am compassionate and slow to anger
- YOU Jonah disobeyed & Ran- YOU have been a recipient of my compassionate character- so how can you be angry!

Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. (5)

- So he's still hoping they'll get treated differently from him. He can't go home – so he sits and watches the city.

And the Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant. (6)

- He's upset and told God off!...but now he's comfortable- so he's not caring about Nineveh so much.

But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. "Death is certainly better than living like this!" he exclaimed. (7-8)

- **God says-** "I'm trying to teach you something here Jonah!"
- "You're more angry about losing the shade than you are about what could happen to all these people!"

Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?" "Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!" (9)

Then the Lord said, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. (10-11)

- "Not to mention all the animals"- 120,000 people- and don't forget the cattle!
- **I honestly don't know** why that's there! But here's my guess.
- **God's saying:** "Jonah- you're so concerned about nature- about wildlife conservation- maybe you could get a little worked up about the animals Jonah!"

Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?" (11)

- **Here's what he's saying to Jonah-** and where it gets a little close to home for us too.

Jonah- you're concerned about all the wrong things.

You're concerned they're not going to get what they deserve. (judgement)

And you're concerned you're not getting what you deserve. (comfort)

Do you know what I'm concerned about? My concern is that nobody gets what they actually deserve!

- *That's why I saved you from the storm and sent a fish- so you didn't get what you deserved!*
- *And the reason I sent you to Nineveh is – I don't want them to get what they deserve either!*
- *Jonah- I want you to partner with me in telling people that if they don't change- they'll get what they deserve- and I don't want that.*
- *But Jonah- you're so concerned about the wrong things you missed it!*

And suddenly this gets pretty personal: because there's a lot of that in me.

- **You know what-** I can get really angry over the car not being fixed properly. At the expense of the people who fix my car- that are going to live forever- somewhere.
- **Do you ever** respond emotionally at a restaurant or a fast food place where you don't get what you want? But the food's going to be gone in moments- and we neglect the staff who are going to last forever- somewhere. (WATOTO CHOIR @ MACDONALDS)
- **And in a big picture way-** we're not unconcerned about people.
- **Generally** we're concerned about the world and we want everyone to know what we do.
- **But in the particular-** in the moment- in the daily events- what's most concerning to God gets overshadowed by what's more concerning to me.
- And most of what you and I get angry about are the small- short term things that are gone in a few hours.
- **But think about the people we overlook** and hardly spend any time trying to relate to? The people that will live forever- somewhere!
- **Ever get more concerned** about the inefficiency in the office- than about the people in the office?
- **Ever get more concerned** about customer service - than about the person serving the customer? That's a little Jonah!
- I think the real measure of **spiritual maturity** is when what concerns God is what most concerns me.
- **God's message to Jonah was-** *"you're so concerned about all the wrong stuff. And I think he says the same to me."*

I've been getting the train to college trains on Wednesdays at about 7 am. It's always nice to find a seat with an empty seat next to it- spread out- relax a bit. But of course- it usually gets crowded- and I move my stuff- and squash up- and they'd have more gadgets- better gadgets-
Do you know what my first thought usually was- **It wasn't-** *"I wonder if this person knows the Lord"*

- **Why was that?** Because there's a little Jonah in me!
- Am I concerned about those people- Oh yeah- in a general- "*God so loved the world*" - kind of way.
- **But in the moment-** in the particular- in the daily event- where it really counts the most- that's not my primary concern.
- What concerns me most is not what concerns my Heavenly Father the most.

Let me ask you:

- **What is your concern?** And let me narrow that a little.
- What is the thing that you're concerned about that gets in the way of expressing concern to the people around you and their eternal destiny?
- **And the difficulty is-** many of your concerns are valid- they're legitimate- they're just not your heavenly Father's greatest concern.

Is it- reputation? Are you more concerned about what they think of you- than about where they spend eternity?

Is it your diary? Are you more concerned to keep to time, than concerned for the person who interrupts that schedule? Or who maybe needs a little more of your time!

What is it? - a habit- a hobby- a hobby horse- how good you're home looks- how good you look- your income...

Ask the question- Why don't I stay- why don't I talk? Why don't I invite? Why don't I have time for this person- what is that temporary concern- that gets in the way of the father's concern for the people around you?

Will you be prepared to let that temporary concern wither and die- just like Jonah's plant: Will you stop watering it and caring about it- and see that concern just like Jonah's plant.- temporary and even selfish- when compared to the mass of people around you who will spend eternity- somewhere.

Do you know what God's concerned about?

- He's concerned about a whole generation of people- single parents- divorcees- teenagers and young adults. Young families and empty nesters and retired- He's concerned about them all.
- **And a sign of maturity-** a sign that we're like Jesus- is when our concerns are in sync with his.
- **And if you're here today** and you're not a Christian- part of your reasoning for not being one is that you've met too many Christians for whom something else was more important.
- **And I need to tell you-** that doesn't reflect God. That's our fault.
- **Because Jonah got it right-** Listen: God is merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. Eager to turn back from dishing out to people what we all deserve.

God says to us what he would say to Jonah:

I'm concerned about people- what are you concerned about?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father: you know our hearts. You know it's not that we don't care. You know we care. But God- we're just so bad at letting the cares of this world just swamp us. And we spend so little time caring about the people you care about. Would you give us in this moment real clarity- What is it that competes with your agenda in our life. What is it that we're so concerned about- to the neglect of the people that you've put in our lives?

Lord, thank you for the people in my life who didn't allow the concerns of this world to get in the way of your concern for me. I pray we would be like them. And that as a church, what concerns you would **one day** be our greatest concern as well. Amen.

Closing song:

O Lord give me an undivided heart. 421
O Kneel me down again (humble king) 1474
Go forth and tell 738
I know you love an offering 1326
Lord of the church 1433