



Jonah 3

At Christmas Sue gave me this book called 'The Blokes Bible'¹ by Dave Hopwood. (Dave is the Creative Director at Lee Abbey. He has a real desire to see more men in church. He often runs a session during Lee Abbey conferences entitled, 'Real Men don't go to church'). In the book a fictional character called Dave goes into his local pub with his Bible and reads various stories from it. These are told in his own modern words. He then thinks about the stories and the characters he meets in the pub. Not long after Mones gave me tonight's passage for the sermon of Jonah 3 I was sitting in bed one morning reading this book and the chapter was entitled 'Sin City' and was on Jonah 3. So here is Dave the fictional character's start to Jonah:

Jonah stands on the beach and prays. There's nothing quite like the threat of death and torture (not in that order) to sharpen your spiritual life. He doesn't know much about these people, but what he does know is all bad. Jonah didn't sign up for this.

When he enrolled in the School of Prophets, there was no talk of lonely abandonment on a blood-soaked beach. Back then it was all words from the Lord and visions from God. There was nothing in the training manual about surviving shipwrecks, storms and fishy stomach acid. Now here he is, stinking of intestinal gas, covered in half digested plankton, cowering on a strange beach in the world's most dangerous country.

The Assyrians relish their tourist trade. They don't have that many visitors so they make the most of any who drop by. They kidnap their enemies, garnish them with flowers, and skin them alive; newcomers get to lie pinned to the ground while living flesh is stripped from their flailing bodies. These are a people who gorge themselves on the suffering of strangers. And Jonah is well aware that he has never been more of a stranger in a strange land.

These people don't deserve good news. They deserve punishment. Swift and painful.

So tonight as we come to meet around the Lord's Table in Communion it is very relevant to look at the book of Jonah.

There are 3 aspects to this story that I would like us to look at. These are:

 *An Undeserving & Unlikely People*

 *An Unexpected Repentance*

 *An Un-required Response*

¹ The Bloke's Bible, D. Hopwood ISBN 1-85078-712-3



First let us briefly look at the undeserving people. Jonah is of course a Jewish prophet from Northern Kingdom of Israel. Therefore he would expect normally to bring God's word to his covenant people the Jews in Israel. But God comes to him and commands him to go to Nineveh.

It is easy to forget that Nineveh is in Assyria. The inhabitants of Nineveh were therefore not Jews following the one true God of Yahweh. And here is Jewish prophet being asked to go and preach destruction to the Ninevites. Assyria's main God was Ashur. In Nineveh the goddess of war & love Ishtar was worshipped. This religion was full of occultist practices that Yahweh hated. When the Lord issues the call to Jonah he says, (in Chapter 1 verse 2):

“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” Jonah 1:2 (NIV)

So not only are they a non-Jewish, i.e. non-Godly people but they are utterly wicked. They were also a very cruel nation. So part of Jonah's reluctance to go and preach destruction to this city, maybe as Dave Hopwood suggests that he could come to a very painful death at their hands. Though maybe there were other factors as we may see at work in his reluctance to obey God's command.

It would also raise in Jonah's mind the question, 'Can a righteous God forgive the wicked'?

So these were and undeserving people.

I wonder whether we every look at some people and think they are undeserving of God's love and forgiveness. Maybe as we look at down and out people who do we write them off as being able to be changed by God. If we think about those hooked on drugs and maybe into some form of crime be it stealing or prostitution. Do we again write them off in our minds as not deserving God's mercy and acceptance.

One of the main aspects of Jonah is that God will have mercy on some very unlikely people. If God called us to go and minister to such people would we go, or would we like Jonah the first time say, 'No'!

As we know after trying to run in the completely opposite direction and be swallowed by a large fish, Jonah says yes the second time God asks him to go to Nineveh. And taking three days he preaches the following message, (in chapter 3 verse 4):

“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” Jonah 3:4a (NIV)

Not really good news is it!



But the amazing thing is that this undeserving and unlikely people unexpectedly repent in response. For we read:

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. Jonah 3:5 (NIV)

In those days some of the signs of repentance were putting on sackcloth or tearing your clothes.

When the message comes to the king of Nineveh we read the following:

He rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast 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." Jonah 3:6 - 9 (NIV)

So we see secondly that this undeserving and unlikely people unexpectedly repent in response to Jonah's message from God.

Let's spend a short period thinking about repentance.

In the Old Testament the word for repentance is sometimes used in relation to God. For at it's most basic it means to turn or return. So sometimes God would turn from one course of action to another. In this sense the word is neutral when used in relation to God.

But more often it is used of people, such as the children of Israel, and then it has the sense of people who have rebelled coming back to serve their rightful King once more. So in this sense it is more than a mere change of mind. It is effectively the re-orientation of the whole of a person's life.²

In the New Testament repentance is deepened. In Joel chapter 2 verse 13 we read:

Render your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Joel 2:13 (NIV)

² A Theological Word Book of the Bible – Ed. Al Richardson ISBN334-01620-7



So God even in the Old Testament asks people to change their hearts not just to carry out the outward observance of repentance. We know how the Pharisees and Sadducees in Jesus time liked to make grand outward gestures of their faith, when inwardly they were far from God. This really annoyed Jesus and he spoke harshly against such outward empty religion.

We know that prior to the start of Jesus ministry, John the Baptist said:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Matthew 3:2 - 3 (NIV)

Again when Jesus started preaching about the Kingdom of God he said:

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” Mark 1:15 (NIV)

So Jesus too makes repentance part of entering the Kingdom and associates it with the Good News of the Gospel. Sometimes we may wonder whether our evangelicalism or evangelism, places enough emphasis on repentance as part of entering in to the new life in Jesus, rather accepting Jesus and eternal life.

One of the traps that I think we can fall into is to see repentance as something we do. Oh dear we think, I need to repent. Then we try to work up an attitude of repentance within us. Sometimes even we Christians, seem to think repentance is being really sorry for our sin. So we think it means grovelling before God as we repeatedly cry words like, ‘God I am really sorry for my sin’.

The trouble is that we are then almost making it a work. We are in effect trying to produce a work of God. It is interesting that when Paul in Ephesians talks about saving faith he says:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no-one can boast. Ephesians 2:8 - 9 (NIV)

Even our faith is by grace, and not something we produce. It is God’s gift to us. We don’t work it up. I believe it is birthed by the Holy Spirit within our lives in response to our meeting God. As people tell us the good news maybe on an Alpha course, I believe God births in our hearts the response of faith and trust in Jesus. We do not work at producing this. Rather we allow it to grow and flow in our lives and out from it.

Similarly I believe as we encounter God he births in us repentance. Remember the story of Zacchaeus. He sees Jesus. Jesus looks up and asks to come to tea with him. He then without apparently any prompting, repents. Not just by an outward show, but through action of promising to return any money that he has unjustly appropriated. And remember what Jesus says in response:

“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Luke 19:9 - 10 (NIV)



And as we have seen repentance is part of entering the Kingdom of God and being saved. Did Zacchaeus work up to this, or was it a response birthed in him by the Spirit of God, as he encountered God in and through his son Jesus.

My sister, Angela, is on the pastoral team at Lee Abbey as a lay chaplain. Her main role is praying with the community members and also with guests who ask for prayer during conferences. She is very experienced in prayer ministry through both training and practice. We were once talking about this area of repentance in prayer ministry. Angela said, '**Graham we can pray for a spirit of repentance**'.

Instead of trying to work ourselves up into a state of being sorry and repentance. Maybe we should pray for the Spirit to come and birth in us the true repentance we need. We could pray, as maybe we should regularly that we will encounter God through the work of the Holy Spirit. For when we encounter God in all his fullness and majesty, it will often work in us the response of repentance.

So we have seen that an undeserving & unlikely people the Ninevites, unexpectedly repent. And God spares the city and all it's inhabitants.

But finally let's briefly look at the **Un-required response** in Jonah. For does Jonah rejoice that God has spared these ungodly and wicked people. No far from it he runs away, sulks and starts to get angry with God. This is what he prays to God at the start of chapter 4:

"O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." Jonah 4:1 - 3 (NIV)

In fact it is here that we can see probably the main reason that Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. True it was a dangerous place, but the second time he went straight away despite the danger. No he knows that God is a gracious God who is abounding in love. This loving God is likely to spare the Ninevites. As a prophet this would undo his reputation. After all a prophet will speak out what God is going to do and will expect to have is prophetic credentials confirmed by it coming true. But not in this case. He proclaims doom and destruction to Nineveh and it is not destroyed. So he cares more about his reputation than the compassion that God has shown to an undeserving and unlikely people.

In the next chapter of Jonah we see how the Lord provided a lovely vine that gave Jonah shade to sit in out of the sun. Then the writer says the Lord also provided a worm that came and chewed the vine so that it withered and died. The Lord also provided a scorching sun. In response to all this Jonah became angry with the vine dying and with God.



God asks him the question:

“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” Jonah 4:9 (NIV)

Jonah replies:

“I do, I am angry enough to die.” Jonah 4:9 (NIV)

Then God finally replies to Jonah:

But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” Jonah 4:10 - 11 (NIV)

I wonder how many times we get angry with God in an unreasonable way. Do we sometimes when we see the most unlikely people becoming Christians resent the fact that they have received God’s grace and forgiveness. We probably wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but may be sometimes our thoughts are not in tune with God. May be there is some unreasonable anger towards God. Thankfully God can handle our anger and he doesn’t punish it for us. But the correct response to such unreasonable anger is for us to learn the message of Jonah and to allow God’s true repentance to be birthed in our heart.

The writer of a commentary sums up this part of the story as follows:

*Having passed judgement on God's handling of these situations, Jonah is taken to task. God pitied Nineveh but destroyed the plant. Jonah on the other hand, pitied the plant but demanded the destruction of Nineveh. ... As the book of Jonah makes plainly obvious, God is sovereign, his justice is totally impartial, and his mercy may extend to anyone.*³

Many of those who write on the Bible say that one of the main reasons Jonah was written was to teach the Jews the importance of repentance. But as we have seen God sometimes leads the most undeserving and unlikely people into a most unexpected repentance. Let us be people who will allow God to birth true repentance in us, and allow him to change our hearts and renew our thinking so that we have a good response to all that he does in others and in our lives.⁴

³ Tyndale OT Commentaries Obadiah, Jonah and Micah, pg124

⁴ Words: 2623