

Text: Jonah 3:1-10

My purpose for this message: God offer of mercy is widespread, even to those that surprise us.

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His Great Mercy

When I was a freshman in high school, I had my very own bully. For some reason the boy I'll call "Shawn" determined back in 7th grade that he would be my character builder and he tormented me at every opportunity. He and I were about the same size but even if I would have had the courage to take him on, I'd have lost because he had a shadow that was a foot bigger.

It never got physical but he often threatened and the day I found myself in the boys' room alone with these two clowns, was the day I thought it was all over.

So, from my vantage point in 9th grade, the very best day of my life was not the day Polly smiled at me, it wasn't the day I earned my sharpshooter badge in rifle club, it was the day our wrestling coach made Shawn cry. Shawn had violated some rule during health class and that just wasn't done. Some of you had Mr. "Smith" and know he was about 5-6, a ton and a half of muscle.

He motioned Shawn out in the hall where he picked him up by the front of the shirt, slammed him up against the lockers, and MADE HIM CRY! When Shawn returned to class his shirt was badly torn and his eyes were wet. I felt so sorry for him I could hardly stifle my laughter. The way I felt about Shawn, I don't think hearing he had come to some tragic end would have saddened me. I would not have been excited about God offering him mercy.

I appreciate God's mercy—shown to an unworthy sinner like me—but there are other unworthy sinners I'd just as soon God would ignore. Do you have some folks in mind like that? Someone, or some group of people that you hope God avoids?

READ Jonah 3:1-10.

Story

As we're going to see next week, Jonah was not only convinced—but fearful that his mission might be a success. I doubt that his average Jewish friend would have thought it possible. A pagan, idol-worshiping city rife with evil and violence is going to repent? Duh! No way. And furthermore, who really *wants* them to? In another 30 years, it will be the *children* of today's Ninevites bearing arms against Israel, killing family members, dragging others off to Nineveh in chains, and by shrewd victory management, destroying the religious and moral health of the Jewish community.

Nonetheless, for the second time God ordered Jonah to Nineveh, and this time the prophet obediently traveled the 500 miles. Nineveh was one of the oldest cities in the world, founded by Noah's great grandson, Nimrod (Gen.10:11). Whether its population was just 120,000 as 4:11 suggests, or if the reference was to the number of *children* in the city, it was a "great city." (2) In fact, there's a good chance that based on the Hebrew text, v.3 should actually read, "Now Nineveh was a great city *to God*—one of 3 days' journey." 4 (1, 3, 3, 4) times in the book God—despite Nineveh's evil—says it's a city that matters.

Upon arriving, Jonah began to preach. These 4 chapters are called a prophetic book, but there are only 5 Hebrew words of prophecy in it (3:4): *Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned*. Certainly there was more to his preaching than this because it's clear that the people understood that the God of heaven and earth was holding them over the threshold of judgment.

And then the most amazing thing happened: (5) *the Ninevites believed God*. Not just some, this was a citywide revival. *They declared a fast and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth*. Even the king. In fact, the king issued a decree that every citizen dress in sackcloth and fast. Not only give up food for a time, but put on that old coarse goatskin. It scratched like a gunny sack and while not making a fashion statement, it did make a spiritual statement: I'm sorry, God! (Here's an interesting picture: imagine what v.8 would have looked like as you drove around the surrounding counties of Nineveh: cows and camels in sackcloth!)

The king was frantic. It's possible that the city was primed to hear Jonah. Depending on the date of his arrival, he might have come shortly after a total solar eclipse that occurred in that area in June of 763 B.C. That always got the attention of superstitious pagans. Oh, and yes, there was this small military threat bearing down on them from Turkey, a forceful people called the Urartus.

But whether or not these pressures were taking its toll, they were not what finally brought Nineveh to its knees; it was Jonah's preaching. A change came over the city. People were desperate. The king issued an edict: *Let everyone urgently call 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*.

Their hope was well founded. READ Jer. 18:7-10. I am a merciful God and my threats of judgment are not absolute. I don't care where you live, what language you speak, what color you are, or what your facial features are like: fight me and die—but obey me and live. And when Nineveh repented, God relented. READ v.10.

What mercy. God saved a city that had honored vice and despised righteousness, a place where men gave free reign to violent tendencies, hatred and immorality.

For American Christians, this picture reminds us that God is not an American God, or an Israeli God, or a French God, or a Bolivian God, he is a universal God. There is not a city, a county, a province, a region that is beyond the scope of His mercy. If a person, if a population, if a region will call on Him in repentance, HE WILL SHOW MERCY. If *America* repents, He will show mercy. If *Canada* repents, He will show mercy. If *Egypt* repents, He will show mercy. If *North Korea* repents, He will show mercy. Look at the future in heaven (READ Rev.7:9). God will show mercy to many people from many nations.

Which may not suit us. As were going to see next week, it didn't suit Jonah that God left Nineveh off the hook. We have a natural tendency to see ourselves and our group as the center of God's universe: God gives the angels order in English, if we're white we think the angels are all white Caucasians, and that the globe on God's desk has America in the center.

Which is not just foolishness, it's pride. And it's a pride that lets us frown at others and dismiss them as unworthy of God's mercy. It's the same pride that haunted the early church: the good news is for us Jews, but not those heathen Samaritans, or Gentiles. We would never say it but it's a pride that lets us think that we somehow *earned* God's mercy. Other's don't get it because they failed to *earn* it.

Who do you hope misses God's mercy? No mercy for my ex-husband—or wife. No mercy for Mr. So-and-So who fired me. Or that immoral president, or my father who abused me, or..., Shawn. No mercy for the people of this race, that nationality. Maybe the people we want to make sure are excluded from God's mercy are the Muslims. After all, their radicals want us all dead—all Christians. They hate us with a religious zeal. And yet God says in Romans 9:25 *I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one*. A

statement about Gentiles, and yet a principle about all people: don't be surprised at whom I show mercy to.

Years I spent in vanity and pride
Caring not my Lord was crucified
Knowing not it was for me He died
At Calvary
Mercy there was great and grace was free
Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty
At Calvary.

Many have sung—and will yet sing—that song in other languages. And one day, we'll all sing together in heaven's language. None of us any nearer to—or farther from—God, than His mercy places us. Dan.9:18-19 says *Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act!*

Concl:

A man I'll call Yousef Sabri pastors a CMA church in Baghdad. In case you haven't heard about it and (you won't on CNN or in the Washington Post) the Lord is on the move in Iraq. 15 new churches have sprung up in Baghdad since 2003. And God is extending mercy to those not yet believers. Pastor Sabri has decided that he will be a distributor—rather than a disrupter of God's mercy.

Outside his church building, he put up a sign that said, "Jesus is the Light of the World." One night someone put a cardboard sign across it with death threats. It read, "Jesus is not the light of the world, Allah is, and you have been warned." It was signed, "The Islamic Shiite Party."

So Sabri piled his van full of children's gifts from a Christian relief agency, as well as some Bibles and medicines, and drove to the headquarters of the Party. At the compound he asked to "see the big sheikh, I have gifts for him."

Once face to face with the leader, he introduced himself as a pastor. The sheikh nodded, "We respect you."

Sabri said, "Christian have love for you, because God is love, our God is a God of love."

The sheikh replied, "We respect your God. We respect Jesus."

Sabri had been praying for just such an opportunity and asked, "If you respect Jesus, would you let me read you His words?" He opened his bible and read from John's gospel, "I am the light of the world." Then he showed the sheikh the cardboard.

As he read it, the sheikh flushed with shame and after a moment said, "We are sorry. This will not happen again. You are my brother. If anyone comes to kill you, it will be my neck first." Later, the sheikh even attended this pastor's ordination.

God is a God of great mercy, which is offered to many. Will we oppose him by disrupting it, or help him by distributing it?