

# **“Hard Truth and the God of Grace”**

## **Jonah 3:1-10**

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 22, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priece

### **INTRODUCTION**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Jonah 3.
- It was a great conversation to have over Saturday morning pancakes. It began at my daughter’s year-end soccer brunch. Another dad started to share with me the difficulties he has with religion. His primary point was that since there are so many different views it is very difficult, if not impossible, to know which is right. He stated that it would take a lifetime to study them all and even then you might not know.
  - My initial response was to sympathize. Take for example the question of what God is like. Although a very small percentage of the world are atheists, the vast majority of people claim to believe in God. The agreement, however, ends there.
    - Some believe God is an impersonal life force that does not prescribe how we should live. Others believe in millions of gods, each of whom react differently to human beings. Still others believe in one God who clearly defines how you are to live. It seems that most people in Victoria believe in a god who accepts everyone and just wants us to be happy.
      - But with so many opinions how can we know?
- The message of Christianity begins with the very realistic view that unless God reveals himself to humanity, we can never really know what He is like or not like. For us to understand what God is like is like a worm trying to understand the mind of Albert Einstein. But the message of Christianity goes on to say that God *has* revealed himself to humanity by speaking to us in ways we can understand. He has done this at many times in many ways.
  - Here in the book of Jonah, for instance, we find God speaking to this great city of Nineveh through his prophet Jonah.
    - Like us, these Ninevites had all kinds of different views on what God is like. But then God cut through all the opinions as He revealed two life-changing truths about Himself. The entire city of Nineveh received these two truths.
- The result was a massive renewal of their city. We read in verse 8 that they turned away from their evil ways and violence. The moral climate and the social problems of this urban centre changed literally overnight.
  - And this was not limited to one class or strata of society. In verse 5 we read that from the greatest to the least, they all received these two great truths. From the Mayor to the heroin addict. From the UVic student to the teenager working at Tim Hortons.
    - All of them experienced a profound renewal.
- In this passage we learn two truths about what God is like. If we receive our lives and our city will experience renewal as well.
  - Let me give them to you up front. First, receive the hard truth of God’s anger. Second, receive the liberating truth of God grace.
    - I must warn you up front that you have to hear both of these truths. They are like a padlock and a key. If you were, for instance, to get frustrated by the lock and walk away before receiving the key you would never get to open the door on who God really is. So stick with me through the padlock and then receive the key.

## THE HARD TRUTH OF GOD'S ANGER

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First, if we want to see renewal in our city, we must receive the hard truth of God's anger.
  - In our culture there is perhaps nothing more offensive than the teaching that God gets angry and brings judgement on people. However, I am hoping that by the end of this point you will believe precisely the opposite – that what is most offensive is a God who never gets angry.
- As chapter 3 opens we find God coming a second time to his prophet Jonah. **READ 1-2** – *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”*
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Here again is the map. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Nineveh is in modern day Iraq.
- Why did God want Jonah to preach to Assyria? Turn back to 1:1. Here we have God's original instruction. **READ 1-2** – *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”*
  - A few weeks ago I gave you some examples of their wickedness. So for instance, when they conquered a city they would take the men, women, and children, skin them alive, and spread their skins over the city walls. They would tear off people's lips and hands. They would bury people in the sand, pull out their tongues and drive a stake through them so that they would die of thirst.
    - In the ancient world, the very name “Nineveh” was synonymous with evil.
- This is why Jonah does not want to go. He doesn't want Nineveh to have chance to repent. He wants Nineveh to burn. Come back to chapter 3 now. We read that Jonah went into the city. Verse 4 describes the message he preached. **READ 4** - *Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”*
  - This word “overthrown” is the same word that is used to describe the occasion when God rained down fire and sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah. He overthrew that city for its wickedness.
- In like manner, God had been patient with Nineveh's wickedness for a long time but as a good and just God He could only wait so long. Nineveh's wickedness had reached a tipping point. Even the king admits that his people are wicked.
  - Look at his description of them in 8. **READ 8** – *let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.*
    - So there you have it. Jonah is to go and preach against Nineveh's wickedness because as the king says, God's fierce anger is about to bring destruction upon them. But many people struggle with this idea of a God who gets angry. Let's address that.

## GOD'S ANGER IS GOOD

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** What may help you to receive this hard truth of God's anger is to realize how different God's anger is from ours. Our anger is so often irrational and ridiculous like when we get upset with kids for dumping their food on the floor. Our anger is often cruel and malicious like when we seek revenge or when all number of violent acts take place.
  - God's anger is none of these. God's anger is only provoked by evil. It is his controlled and settled antagonism to all that is evil.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** When you think of it this way, you realize that a good God must get angry. If he does not get angry at evil He is not good. Let me say it this way.

- What would be most offensive is if God never got angry with the fact that, *“The United Nations estimates that 700,000 to 4 million women and children are trafficked around the world for purposes of forced prostitution, labor and other forms of exploitation every year...Victims of trafficking are subject to gross human rights violations including, rape, torture, forced abortions, starvation, and threats of torturing or murdering family members.”*<sup>1</sup>
- How does your God respond to such a thing? A God that does not get angry at such things and such people is not worthy of worship.
  - So you see God’s anger is in fact a reflection of His perfect goodness. The final proof that God is a good God is that he has set a day of judgement when he will repay every person according to what they have done.
    - The wicked will not go unpunished for scripture says that God will punish them with everlasting destruction.

## GOD’S ANGER IS AGAINST ALL SINNERS

- But it is right here that the hard truth gets even harder. For you see the Scriptures say it is not just the sex traffickers and murders that have sinned against God. The scriptures declare that we have all sinned. The city of Nineveh is a picture of the whole human race.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** Receive the hard truth of God’s anger by realizing that like the Ninevites, we all deserve God’s anger for our rebellion against him.
- You see, at the end of the day the most offensive verse in the Bible is not about God’s anger or judgment. The most offensive verse in the Bible is not about sexuality, homosexuality, or Jesus being the only way to God.
  - Do you know what the most offensive verse in the Bible is? It is the first verse of the Bible that says, *“In the beginning God created the heavens and earth.”* That verse declares that there is only one God who created everything that exists. Since you and I are created beings it means that we owe our Creator everything. We owe him thanks, praise, and worship. We are not free to make up our own rules. God is our Creator.
    - But we have all said, *“You may have created me but I will be my own god. I will make up my own rules. I want the life you gave me but I don’t want you. I will live how I want to live.”*
- This is the greatest act of evil possible – to forsake our good Creator who has given us life and breath and everything else and to set up ourselves as our own little gods in opposition to him.
  - Like Nineveh then, we find ourselves in a terrible situation. The Scriptures declare that a day is coming when God will overthrow this rebellious planet.
    - On that day all people, from the greatest to the least, will stand before his throne. Books will be opened and each person will be judged according to what they have done. Another book will be opened – the book of life. If anyone’s name is not found to written in the book of life, they will face eternal destruction.
- Will you receive this hard truth that you have sinned against your Creator? I plead with you to heed the example of the Ninevites. They did not reject this hard truth. Verse 5 says, *“And the people of Nineveh believed God.”* They humbled themselves and called on God to have mercy.
  - My friends, if we want to see renewal in our city, we must receive the hard truth of God’s anger.
- But thanks be to God that is not the only truth. If it was, we would all despair. We would be locked out of God’s presence.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.worldrevolution.org/Projects/Webguide/GuideArticle.asp?ID=1430>

- It is right here that the message changes, like the darkness of night changes with the sunrise. It is right here that we receive the key to unlock God's heart.

## RECEIVE THE LIBERATING TRUTH OF GOD'S GRACE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** If we want to see renewal in our city, we must receive the liberating truth of God's grace.
  - If God was only a just God we would be in trouble. There would be no escape from his anger. But the just God is also a gracious God.
    - Let me show you three reasons why you should receive the liberating truth of God's grace from this story.

## THE GOD OF GRACE LOVES REBELS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** First, receive the God of grace because He loves rebels.
  - Notice how God refers to Nineveh in verse 2. He calls it *"that great city."* Turn back to chapter 1. It is the same thing in verse 1. Jonah is commanded to go to Nineveh, *"that great city of Nineveh."* Now turn over to chapter 4. Look at how the book ends in verse 11. God says to Jonah, *"And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left."* Despite his anger, God has a great love for this great city.
    - Oh receive this liberating truth. Although Nineveh, and the whole world, has rebelled against God, God loves this rebellious planet. Most of you have no idea how radical this is. Most westerners assume God is loving but that is only because you grew up in a society that still has the remnants of Christian worldview. That God loves humanity is by no means a given.
  - Sociologist Rodney Stark writes, *"Romans thought that gods might come to their aid, but they did not believe that the gods loved them - indeed Jupiter was depicted as quite unfriendly to human concerns. Consequently, pagan Romans often feared the gods, admired some of them, and envied them all, but they did not love them."*<sup>2</sup>
    - The gods of our European forefathers were fierce and warlike gods. The gods of the East, of Hinduism, do not love human beings. But everywhere the Bible teaches us that, despite our rebellion and God's anger toward us, He still loves us. *"For God so loved the world."*
      - This is good news because it means there may be hope for us. There may be a way to escape the destruction that we deserve.

## THE GOD OF GRACE PURSUES REBELS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** Receive the God of grace because He pursues rebels.
  - Note carefully that God's love and concern are not just feelings. God acts. His grace and love are shown in the fact that he sends Jonah to warn Nineveh. He did not have to do that. He would have been just to simply destroy them. But He doesn't. God pursues them. He sends his prophet to warn them.
    - So it seems then that God's threat of the city being overturned in verse 4 is a conditional one that depends on the response of the Ninevites.
  - This leads most commentators to think that Jonah is not really preaching the full message that He was supposed to. His message is only doom and gloom. We see in chapter 4 that Jonah just wants Nineveh to burn.

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<sup>2</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 18.

- But God had clearly stated the following in Jeremiah 18:67, ***“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.”***
  - Do you see how gracious God is then? He does not just love Nineveh. He pursues them. He warns them in order that they might not be destroyed.
- On a far greater scale God did not just have good feelings of love toward this rebellious planet. No, God acted to rescue us. ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son.”*** God sent Jesus into this world. Jesus voluntarily went to the cross. On the cross he took upon himself the sins of all his people, from the greatest to the least. On the cross, Jesus took upon Himself the fierce anger of God that should have been directed at us. On the cross, Jesus was overthrown.
  - Oh what a God of grace. Rather than bringing destruction upon us for our rebellion, God brought destruction upon His own Son. Jesus voluntarily took this upon himself.
    - The God of grace is still pursuing rebels. He still sends his people out to speak of his grace. He pursued me by speaking to through my parents. He pursues you by sending Christians into your life, by bringing you to church, by causing you to think on these things. Oh receive the God of grace because he lovingly pursues rebels.

## THE GOD OF GRACE SHOWS COMPASSION TO PENITENT REBELS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** Receive the God of grace because He shows compassion to repentant rebels.
  - Here is the best news of the day. The God of grace does not just love us. The God of grace does not even just pursue us. The God of grace shows compassion to us when we turn from our sins to seek his grace.
    - Look at the response of the Ninevites in verse 5. **READ 5** – ***And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.*** The king does the same and orders the whole population to do so. Why? Look at his hope-filled comment in verse 9. **READ 9** – ***Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”***
  - Can you imagine how tense that 40 days was? As the sun dawned on the 40<sup>th</sup> day people would have sat in tense silence? Would the God of heaven and earth show mercy? Or was he only a just God? Would God relent or is he the kind of God who delights to punish?
    - We find out what kind of God he is in verse 10. **READ 10** - ***When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.***
      - Do you see it? God delights to show grace to rebels who humble themselves before Him. Again, this is the message of the Bible. God loved this planet. He sent His Son Jesus to die for our sins.

## THE GOD OF LOVE

- D.A. Carson tells the story about a woman he met in Northern Ireland a few years ago. She had just graduated from teacher’s college and got a job teaching grade 4 boys in a rough area of town. In the Northern Ireland they still teach Bible classes in school and she was assigned this Religious Education class.
  - She was a devout Christian but she made no headway at all with these tough boys. Then she had an idea. She came into class and said, ***“Boys, we are going to create a world with Plaster of Paris. You get to make the creatures. Make them look however you want.”***

- You can imagine what these grade 4 boys made. All kinds of monsters and creatures and some rather obscene sculptures. She did not mind. She put them in the oven and baked them.
- The next day she said, ***“Now that we have our creatures, we need to make a world that they can live in.”*** So on a giant board they built mountains and rivers and trees. They even had a train station. This was not the religious education class the boys were used to but they did not mind.
  - When they brought the creatures to live in the world she said, ***“Now we have these creatures. What kind of rules should we make for them so that they stay safe and enjoy their new world? What would be good for them?”***
    - One boy said, ***“There should be a rule that they can’t go in the lake or else they will dissolve.”*** Another boy said, ***“They should not be allowed to go near the edge or they might fall and shatter on the ground.”*** Still another boy said, ***“Don’t get in fights or you might break each other’s arms off.”*** Eventually she had about 20 rules that they had thought up. She said, ***“wow, those are a lot of rules. Don’t you think this could be reduced down to one or two?”*** One boy shouted out, ***“yea, just do what I tell ya.”***
- The next day she came back and said, ***“Children, we have a problem. What should happen if one of your creatures sits up, looks at you and says, ‘I don’t like your rules and I don’t like you. This is my world. My train station. My lake. My friends. I will do it my way. You can take your rules and get lost.’ Boys, how will you respond if that happens?”***
  - One boy shouted out in good Irish style, ***“I would break their bloody necks.”*** She then got her Bible out and read Genesis 1-3 – the story of God creating the world and Adam and Eve rebelling against his one good rule.
    - But oh what grace we find in our Creator. Although we sinned against him, he did not break our necks. He showed amazing grace to us by sending His Son into the world to have, as it were, his neck broken in our place. What a God of grace!
- And so now like the Ninevites we all face a critical decision. We stand under the anger of God. But Jesus Christ has come into the world. The scriptures say, ***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”***
  - In his grace God gave the Ninevites 40 days to seek God’s mercy. So today, God delays the day of judgement because He is not willing that any should perish. But friends, the day will come when that window will close. On that day it will be too late.
    - That is why I press upon you the need to, this very hour, get right with God. Like the Ninevites humble yourself before Him. Admit your rebellion. Ask for His mercy. And you will receive grace.
- My dear friends, receive the hard truth of God’s anger. But more than that, receive the liberating truth of God’s grace. **(SHOW SLIDE 11)**