

A Scandal of Grace

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[0 : 0 0] And this is God's word. 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.

So Jonah arose and he went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days journey and breath.

And Jonah began to go into the city going a day's journey and he called out, yet 40 days in Nineveh shall be overthrown. And the people of Nineveh believed God and they called for a fast and they put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them.

And the word reached the king of Nineveh and he arose from his throne. He removed his robe, he covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes and he issued a proclamation and he published it throughout Nineveh.

By the decree of the king and his nobles let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth and let them call out mightily to God.

[1 : 1 4] Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

And 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. This is God's holy word.

You see, I was too eager to get up here and preach. That's why I got up early. I see a lot of tired faces here tonight and I feel it as well. It's dark outside, it's warm in here.

I will try my very best to keep you awake. But how could we not stay awake if it's such an exciting story? Because the story that we just read is really a scandal, a scandal of grace.

It's a story about a compassionate God, a God who gives second chances, a God who does not delight in destroying people and killing people, but who wants people to turn back to him, to run back to God.

[2 : 2 3] It's all about God's scandalous grace and mercy towards sinners like you and me. So let's look at the text. How do we see that God gives second chances?

Well, we see it all over the place. We see it all throughout chapter three in the book of Jonah. And it starts with Jonah already. We know Jonah ran away from God. He was then in the fish, he prayed a prayer.

He cried for help and God made the fish vomit Jonah out again on the beach. And the story in chapter three continues with God asking Jonah to go to Nineveh once again.

And he uses the same words he used in the first chapter already with a little different, different wording. He says, preach to them, don't preach against them.

In the Hebrew, this is clearer. In the English translation, it doesn't come out as clear. But Jonah, he actually does it this time. You would expect maybe Jonah, the runaway prophet, the guy who was so stubborn, he runs away again.

[3 : 33] But no, he does it. He goes to Nineveh and he goes and he preaches to this great city. Some have said it's the shortest sermon ever preached.

Just a few words. Personally, I think Jonah probably preached more than just one sentence. But regardless of what he preached and how long the sermon was and how often he preached, the gist was to say that in 40 days, Nineveh shall be overthrown.

So let's pick up on two things in the sentence. 40 days and the little word overthrown. Firstly, why 40 days? What's the significance of that?

The 40 days, if you are a Jew and you read the book of Jonah and you see that God and Jonah, they're talking about 40 days, your mind would go back to the last time in the Old Testament when people messed up and there was a 40 day period given to them.

And that's when the Israelites went out of the country, the land of Egypt, and Moses was on the mountain, receiving the 10 commandments on Sinai, and the Israelites were making a golden calf and they were falling into idolatry.

[4 : 55] It's in that story that Moses then intercedes on Israel's behalf so that God would not destroy the people of Israel.

And for 40 days and for 40 nights, Moses doesn't eat or drink. So there is this 40 day period. Now the logic would be that Jonah, he's also a prophet of God, he could go to Nineveh and he would intercede for Nineveh.

But Jonah, of course, doesn't do that. And it's here where you see that Jonah did have an experience of faith, an experience of grace in the belly of the fish in chapter 2, but it seems as though the head knowledge has not sunk into his heart.

It seems like, although he says, salvation belongs to the Lord, he's still not very keen on the Ninevites being saved.

Why do I say this? It's because of the word overthrown that we read in this little verse. The word overthrown, it's a word that is in Hebrew, it's called hapak.

[6 : 07] It's not really important for you to know this, but it's interesting. It was used in the Bible for the destruction of the city Sodom and Gomorrah.

So Jonah knows this. And Jonah knows that this word overthrown could mean that God will destroy Nineveh.

But at the same time, this word overthrown, it actually carries a notion of changing, of reforming, and the sentence 40 days until Nineveh is reformed, or will be reformed, sounds very different.

It's an ambiguous message. But in Jonah's mind, he is convinced, he's convinced that God will destroy the city of Nineveh, so he goes.

Now, why does God give Jonah an ambiguous message? I think it's to expose how bitter Jonah is, how obsessed Jonah is with judgment.

[7 : 09] As we will find out later, Jonah doesn't believe that there is a second chance for Nineveh. Jonah hates the Ninevites. He hates those little dirty pagans who are so violent, who are a threat for Israel.

That's what he really feels like. He thinks they are too far gone. And that's very interesting, because in Jeremiah chapter 18, God says this.

God says, if at any time I announce that a nation or a kingdom is to be abrooted, torn down, and destroyed, and if that nation I want repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.

God is giving it right there. Clearly, God will have mercy on those who repent. The reason why Jonah goes to Nineveh the second time is because he's certain that he's just telling them that they are going to be destroyed and there is nothing that they can do about it.

And that's ironic, isn't it? Isn't it Jonah who just got a second chance after he ran away from God? Isn't it, isn't Jonah the only prophet in the Old Testament who even does get a second chance?

[8 : 26] There's no other prophet who ever had that. Usually, prophets were quite, they were judged quite quickly because they had so much revelation from God. Jonah gets a second chance.

Why is that happening? Think two reasons. Firstly, Jonah tried to manipulate God, and God is not having any of that. God won't let him do that.

Secondly, God wants Jonah to grow in mercy. The story is just as much about Jonah as it is about the Ninevites.

It's probably more about Jonah than the Ninevites, to be honest. It's all a story to show Jonah what mercy means and what God's character is like and how he is merciful.

Jonah is obsessed with judgment. He has a bitterness against these Ninevites in his heart, and God shows Jonah mercy in order for Jonah to show them mercy.

[9 : 25] It's not the only time in the Bible that God is giving someone a second chance. I don't know if you've heard about Peter in the New Testament. I like Peter a lot.

Peter is an apostle. He is a disciple of Christ. He follows Jesus for three years. He's got a big mouth, always talks a lot. Sometimes doesn't follow up.

In the New Testament, there is this one moment where Jesus calls Peter the son of Jonah. Peter's dad, we know his name from the Bible, is actually John.

But Jesus clearly says Jonah, so Jesus is making a pun here. He's saying, Peter, you're a son of Jonah. What is he meaning by that? Why does Jesus do that? It's because just a few verses later, Jesus predicts his own death.

He reveals Peter his own will, and he says that he will have to suffer and to die. Peter denies that, and he tells Jesus that that can't never happen to him. That should never happen to Jesus.

[10 : 25] Jesus had just told Peter, I'll build my church on you. But then he rebukes him and says, get behind me, Satan. You're a hindrance to me. You're not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

And then even later, Peter, after the, when Jesus is arrested, Peter betrays Jesus. He messes up again.

And later in the book of Acts, Peter doesn't want to eat with the Gentiles. He doesn't want to eat unclean food, and it requires a vision for him to even go and eat with those Gentiles.

Very interestingly, he is in Joppa at that point. If you remember, Joppa is the place where Jonah was when he fled God's commission, God's commandment, God's mission for him.

And again, and again, and again, Peter messes up. And again, and again, and again, Jesus is patient. And he gives him a second chance, and another chance, and another chance.

[11 : 32] That is Jesus' character. And you can see in Peter that he is sorry. He weeps bitterly. He repents, much like the Ninevites.

God wants to give you a second chance, too. If you're a Christian here tonight, you have experienced that. You've experienced the moment where you have given your life to Jesus, as we call it.

You have experienced the forgiving nature of God. I hope you live in the freedom of knowing that God is a God of second chances.

And that when you mess up, he will be patient and forgiving, if you ask him, for forgiveness. So in that regard, Peter was better than Jonah.

Nonetheless, many of us are sons and daughters of Jonah, in the way that we need second chances. And if you are here tonight considering the claims of Christianity, the claims of the Gospel, and you might be looking for a second chance, then maybe this is your sign to go and to pray and to ask for a second chance tonight.

[12 : 43] To ask for forgiveness. Because as I said, this is a scandal of grace. It's a scandal, judging from the expressions on your faces.

I'm not sure if you're grasping what I mean. This is something that has never happened before in the Bible. The only way that this is not doing anything with you right now, is either because you were raised in a Christian home, and you heard the story a gazillion times, and you're like, yeah, of course, you get swallowed by a fish, of course, God doesn't destroy an inn of it, blah, blah, blah.

Move on, please, right? Or you think that maybe the Ninevites deserve forgiveness. Maybe you think God can punish them.

Why would he? They are just people, right? And that's a worldview that our society has at the moment. Punishment. That's not good. Would a good God do that?

Would a good God punish people? If you ask Jonah, yes. Jonah wants it. Jonah says, yes. God, please punish them.

[13 : 52] They don't deserve it. And Jonah is so blind that really he should have been punished too. Jonah is so blind to the fact that he is one of the Ninevites, that he wants to see destroyed.

That's true for us too, isn't it? We don't deserve God's grace. We don't deserve forgiveness. The Ninevites, Jonah is actually right.

The Ninevites didn't deserve forgiveness. That's exactly the point. They did not deserve it. But if they did deserve it, it wouldn't be grace.

That's what grace is. It's a gift. It's something you can't earn. Grace is something you do not deserve. There's a story that I heard this week that portrays really well what grace is.

It really moved me, and I'd like to share it with you. It's a true story from the Second World War. And it's about a man called Irino Dapazzo. He was forced by the Nazi regime to translate letters, which would contain data about dates and names about Jews who were supposed to get deported.

[15 : 16] And he would warn those Jews before the Nazis had the chance to arrest them. And he was found out eventually. So they sentenced him to death, but because he had four children and a wife, they lowered his sentence, and he was imprisoned in a concentration camp.

And he had been there for about nine months. He weighed around 90 pounds. He was covered in wounds. They broke his right arm. They didn't give him any medical help.

It was winter, winter in 1943. And this man is sitting around the fire with his mates, just talking about something, trying to make the time pass. When a commander, one of the guards, one of the commanders in the concentration camp, calls Irino to his office.

So Irino goes and he stands in front of this commander. He's shirtless. He's barefoot. He has almost, I mean, he looks half dead as it were.

And this commander, he sits at his table, and the table is covered in food. It's Christmas Eve. And the commander eats, and Irino stands there.

[16 : 26] The pazzo stands there, and he has to watch this commander eat food in front of him for an hour. And at some point, the door opens, and someone brings in biscuits, and cakes, and coffee.

And Irino stands there, and he watches the commander eat these little cakes. And at some point, the commander says this, and I read from his autobiography that he wrote later on.

The commander says, your wife is a good cook. I didn't understand what he meant. Then he told me, your wife has been sending you parcels of small cakes for seven months.

I've eaten them with great pleasure. And now, the pazzo writes, I had to fight the temptation to hate him and accuse God. I knew that my wife and children had very little to eat.

They had now saved flour, fat, and sugar from their already meager rations to send me something. And this man here had eaten my children's food. Again, the devil whispered to me, hate him, pazzo, hate him.

[17 : 34] And again, I prayed, and God prevented the hatred from taking possession of me. Then I asked the commander to hand me one of the biscuits. I didn't want to eat it. I just wanted to look at it and think of my children.

But the tormentor didn't grant my request. Instead, he cursed me. I said to him, you're a poor man, commander, but I am rich because I believe in God and have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

He got very angry and sent me back to the camp. And this scene stuck with Irino da Pazzo. And when the war was over, he could not forget what had happened on Christmas 43.

So he decided to find this commander. And 10 years later, he actually found him and he decided to visit him. And then he writes this, he no longer recognized me.

Then I told him, I'm number one, seven, five, three, one. Do you remember Christmas 1943? Now he remembered all the horrors.

[18 : 33] Him and his wife were suddenly terrified. Trembling, he asked, have you come to take revenge? Yes. I replied and opened a parcel I had brought with me.

A large cake appeared. I asked his wife to make coffee. Then we drank coffee and ate cake together. The man looked at me, completely confused.

He could not understand why I was acting like this. Finally, he started to cry and asked me to forgive him. I then said that I'd forgiven him for the same reason.

That I'd forgiven him for the sake of Jesus' love. A year later, he confessed his terrible guilt to Jesus Christ and his wife also gave her life to Jesus.

Both were able to experience liberating forgiveness from all their sins. Wow. What a story. That is what grace is. It made me think about how Jesus stood in front of the Sanhedrin undressed, mocked, they spat in his face.

[19 : 40] They beat him. Just like this man, Irino Dapazos, stand in front of the commander, mocked, tormented, this man eating the food of his children and wife. Yet Jesus went to the cross willingly.

Yet God chased you. See, grace is not simply forgiving your debt. It is like this man coming to you and bringing your cake.

Giving you so much more than you deserved. That's a scandal. It doesn't make any sense. Grace is always a scandal.

But there is something else in this story, the Ninevites. What do they do? They repent. Martin Luther says this, in order to become fit to obtain the grace of Christ, a man must completely despair of himself.

Jesus always preached, repent and believe. And that's what the Ninevites are doing here. If you look at verse five, it says, and they believed.

[20 : 49] And then after that it says, they called for a fast and they put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. And there are two things I'd like to point out. First of all, they believed in God.

Secondly, they repented. They believed in God. They knew so little. Jonah had given them almost nothing to work with, right? They didn't even know the name of God.

Yahweh. They knew so little yet they believed. Such little revelation, such little knowledge about who this God is. Yet they placed their faith in God.

And friends, the Ninevites are not giving us any excuses tonight. We've got the Bible. We've got the freedom to visit church services every Sunday.

We've got the internet, thousands of sermons and articles, right out of fingertips. We know so much yet believe so little. Secondly, they repented.

[21 : 49] Secondly, they repented. These horrible, violent, aggressive, nasty Ninevites. He would never expect them. Like the commander in the story, he would never expect him to repent.

Yet they did. And there's one little application in there. Do you sometimes look at people and think they're too far gone? Because the Gospel says no. The Gospel says he will never be too far gone.

From verse six onwards, we get details of what their repentance looked like. The king leaves his throne. Even the animals aren't allowed to drink or eat anymore.

They put on sackcloth. They cry out to God and they turn away from their violent ways. And that's exactly what repentance means in the original language. Turning away.

Turning away from your path, from the things you did. It means turning around. It means running to the Father. Some of you might wonder whether all of this is done to try to earn your salvation.

[22 : 53] I repent. Therefore, I've deserved God's grace. That's not what it's all about. All of these things, fasting, putting on sackcloth, sitting in ashes.

They're all signs of humiliation. They humble themselves. A sign of saying, I'm utterly sorry for what I've done and there's nothing. There's nothing in this world I can do to save myself.

It means saying, I do deserve the punishment that is prepared for me. That's what the Nine Invites are saying. Maybe, maybe, maybe God will have mercy on us.

They know there's nothing left to do. Truly repenting means recognizing that God's grace is not cheap. God's grace is costly.

We know this on this side of the cross. We know what God had to do in order to be able to lavish this grace upon us. He had to send His only Son to die on the cross. Grace is costly.

[23 : 55] It's not cheap. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, what is costly for God cannot be cheap for us. It costs them a lot to call us sons and daughters again.

If your reaction to your sin is not like the reaction of the King who arises from His throne, removes His robes and then sits in sackcloth and ashes, then it's not the right reaction.

If you do not get up from the throne of your life recognizing that you are actually powerless, that you calling the shots, you making the decisions, led you into death and despair, then there is no chance to truly repent.

We have to humble ourselves. If you do humble yourself, if you do do it, if you realize that you need forgiveness, then that you need grace, then there is every second chance in the world.

Then God will be faithful and He will forgive your sins. Tim Keller puts it that way. The irony of the gospel is that the other person is not guilty.

[25 : 00] The irony of the gospel is that the only way to be worthy of it is to admit that you're completely unworthy of it. Can you tonight say, I'm not worthy?

I'm not worthy of your grace. I'm not worthy of your forgiveness, God. That is the only way. The free church believes or subscribes to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and there is this beautiful sentence in there, and it says, as there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation, so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.

Did you hear that? There is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent. If you truly repent, if you say, I'm sorry, if you humble yourself, if you give all your life, if you surrender your life to God, then He will give you a second chance.

Not because you did so well, not at all, but because Jesus did. Romans 8 verse 1 says, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

You see, God loved you when you were still sinful. He went into the city when the city was still sinful, and He went on the cross and died for you there. When your eyes are open for the first time, you can see all the dirt, you can see all the things you've done and said and thought, all the filth in your life, and you feel horrible, and you know what, that's scary, but that's a good thing, because without that, there is no chance to say, I'm sorry, to ask for forgiveness, to truly repent, to turn away, to have a change, to change the way you're thinking, to have a change of mindset.

[26 : 56] God relented from destroying Nineveh, and that's truly a scandal. Why? Because grace always is a scandal. Let us pray.

Father, we thank you for the story tonight of the city of Nineveh, the city that belonged to you, that you saved from destruction.

I pray for all of us here tonight that you would give us hearts that are repentant, that you would help us to lead lives that are repentant, that you would call us sinners to turn around to you and to run back into your arms.

We ask for forgiveness for all of us sins. In Jesus' precious name, amen.