

The Will, The Way, The World

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Date: 10 February 2019

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[0 : 00] So, please turn to Jonah chapter 3 if you have a Bible with you. I'm going to spend a bit of time in this passage tonight.

Heading for the sermon is the will, the way, and the word. And what I'd say about this chapter and tying it into the book just by way of introduction is in some ways Jonah is a bit of a microcosm of what keeps, keeps, keeps coming through the pages of the Bible.

That is the message of repentance and grace from a holy God to a sinful people. This is a biblical theme that comes up time and time and time and time and time again. The message of repentance and grace from a holy God to a sinful people.

And in some ways what we get here is, like I say, a microcosm of not just the message but the way in which God communicates to people down through the ages as he speaks again and again and again, bringing his theme to sinful people.

I was thinking about advertising when I was preparing this. So all kinds of companies have all kinds of different messages that they want you to hear. They want you to be persuaded of the value, the wonder of their product so that you will buy them.

[1 : 24] And I was thinking about a slogan because the thing about products is that they can change and the slogans that advertise the products can change.

As we change as a society, everything's shifting and changing, isn't it? And so the way that things have to be kind of put out there is desirable constantly has to change at one level. So Mars bars, talk about Mars bars just to start off.

Mars bars used to, I mean, to me they still do signify, a Mars a day helps you work, rest and play. So Mars bars are very helpful.

They help us do what we have to do in life. But that's not the slogan anymore. I was dismayed to find out. The slogan nowadays is this, put some play in your day.

So they changed it. They kept the whole play theme, but work and rest kind of got put to the side there somewhat. And I read a little bit about the reasoning for that.

[2 : 24] Why did they change it? It's working pretty well for me. So apparently, according to the ad guys, the new positioning is about a mental uplift.

They've thought long and hard about this. Short-lived moments that are more fun. The campaign we are rolling out shows that we're not taking life too seriously.

So a Mars a day helps you work, rest and play. It's obviously far too diligent. But add a bit of play into your day. In some ways, it's obviously more in tune with the modern psyche, apparently.

So here's the thing. Products change a bit. Mars bars got smaller, surely. I think everybody knows that. The way they're advertised changes, because people apparently change.

You have changed, and therefore Mars think they need to change the way they promote their brand so that you will still be enticed to buy it. So messages change.

[3 : 24] Everything, companies shift and change to keep up with the way that people think nowadays. God is the same, and he says the same things to people who may change.

Obviously, he speaks into different contexts and cultures, at sometimes, often using different people, sometimes using slightly different methods. But like I said, in this chapter, we get, as it were, a prototype of the unchanging, compelling way that God communicates to people all the way down through the ages.

So I'm going to pick that out of this chapter. I'll be looking at three words. I'm going to put the three words up on the screen, and you can see the way that they come out really clearly in this chapter.

And I'm going to link that in to another part of scripture, which again shows us the way that God consistently and compellingly communicates to people down through the ages.

So we're going to start with the first word. We put it up on the screen, and that is the word, word. All right? It occurs in this chapter three times. Here we go.

I'm going to find it in verse one, and in verse three, and in verse six. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Now, I said already, you'll see if you look to chapter one, God's already said this in chapter one.

[4 : 48] Now, the word of the Lord came to Jonah. First time around, he ignores it. Well, he doesn't ignore it. He takes great objection to it, and so he runs away. But here we are again in chapter three.

The word comes to Jonah. Verse three, So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. It was that which motivated him.

The word is a catalyst. It produces movement in his life. We'll come back to that theme. And then again in verse six, the word has an impact on the people who hear it.

No less on the king himself. He gets to hear about what's going on in the city. People start to respond to what Jonah's saying, and the king gets to hear about this. So here we go. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.

So the word keeps cropping up all the way through. It's a prophetic staple, if you like. Jonah's a prophet. We mentioned that already. If you look throughout the Bible and you read about different prophets, often you'll get the kind of stock phrase, the word of the Lord came to Isaiah or Jeremiah.

[6 : 01] Go tell. Go speak. Go tell an unrepentant people. Go tell my dear people who I love. The word of the Lord came from God too.

So he goes through people like Jonah all the time. So that makes it, we've looked at this in Escalia. Isn't it amazing then the way that Jonah responds, if you know anything of the story, when he does a runner in chapter one.

Who would do that? Being a prophet of the Lord, commissioned by the Lord to go and bring his word to people.

Who do you listen to in your life? We listen to different people at different levels. So I don't know, think about your office. Let's say there are five people in your office.

Maybe three of them speak complete nonsense most of the time and two of them you really listen to. Why is that? That's because they're really good at what they do or they give you good counsel or because you like them or because they tell you what you want to hear.

[6 : 59] We listen to different people for different reasons, don't we, sometimes? It's really easy to listen to people because they make us feel good.

The word as it comes to us from the Lord came to these people and it comes all the way down through the ages to all people who will hear it and to me and you.

And the simple question with this first word is what value do you place when you hear the word of the Lord? So that looks like the time you maybe carve out of your day to open it.

To recall it, you know, to let your mind dwell on it for 10 minutes, longer if you have it. The way in which it actually changes who you are and what you do, we're going to see how important the word is as a catalyst.

It should always produce change in us. Now, second slide, please. If you go to John chapter one, very different culture, very different time, pivotal time in terms of God's plan of salvation and the way in which he moves into the desperate mess of humanity to bring himself to the fore and to bring salvation.

[8 : 16] John chapter one in the beginning was the word. Now here the word is a person. So you know this. If you've been coming to church a lot, if you're a Christian, this is Jesus.

And the word was with God and the word was God. And then we read on in verse 14, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.

So the question is then, do you treasure the word to you and do you treasure the word incarnate, which is Jesus Christ himself? God speaks to people all down through the ages, and that is exemplified ultimately in Jesus.

So this is the first word. And the second one, we'll put up just now, is called. The word called occurs in Jonah chapter three, four times.

So let's see where this comes out, verse two, and four, and five, and eight. Chapter three, verse two, 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.

[9 : 22] The third comes to Jonah, and Jonah is to go and speak his own words, calling out to the people of the city. Verse four, Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey, and he called out, so he basically did exactly what he was told to, this time, this time.

Yet, forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Verse five, and the people of Nineveh believed God, they called for a fast, and put on sack cloth from the greatest of them to the least of them.

What would that have looked like? Can you picture the scene? Ancient city, big city, by their standards. Very proud, very powerful, very wicked city.

Hearing this itinerant preacher, who they've never seen before, come and walk in through their city, shouting out to them words from a God who is not their God.

And it has such an impact on them that they begin to call out amongst themselves, cut to the bone at the state of their own hearts, and what they must do.

[10 : 33] Quite a scene, quite a dramatic scene, so much so that it reaches the ears of the king. So the king, from verse seven, issued a proclamation published through 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.

So an intro verse eight, but let man and beast be covered with sack cloth, let them call out mightily to God, there's that word again. Let them call out to God. They didn't do that before, that wasn't a part of their day, it wasn't a priority of them.

Another God, a pagan God, this or that one, but not this God, not Yahweh. Now the king is saying, let them call out to him, not just kind of doff their caps, acknowledge him in passing, call out to him, shout out his name, call out that he will acknowledge them.

So there's the second word, and again, can we go to the fourth slide, which brings us back to John's Gospel? Because what we read here is of the one who was sent to anticipate the imminent coming into the world of Jesus Christ, John the Baptist.

If you like the last of the old school, the Old Testament prophets, whose job it was to go and call out to people, here again is the word from God coming to you, the people hadn't heard from God for a few hundred years.

[11 : 59] Where is the word of God to us? What's he doing? Has he forgotten us? There was a man sent from God whose name was John, came as a witness, the bare witness about the light that all might believe through him.

So we read John bore witness about him and cried out. See what his job was? To do exactly the same thing, to go amongst people and to call out the message, hear the word of the Lord turn from your sin, be ready for the one who is coming.

And he goes on to speak about Jesus. So you see that the pattern that emerges there. John has got this task to do in line with the job of the prophets echoed by John the Baptist himself.

Now, of course as well, and I just want to touch on this briefly in many ways in keeping with Jesus' own ministry. So let me read one verse from Mark's Gospel.

Mark chapter one verse 14, we read these words. After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God.

[13 : 08] Jesus is doing exactly the same thing. Jesus himself, the Word incarnate, comes into the cities and towns full of sinners and wayward people and begins to call out, hear the word of the Lord, get ready, be changed, be changed in who you are.

So word and called out. Before we move on to the third word, think for a minute about what God is doing here.

We saw this morning in Eskireli, why would God have to do this? He didn't need the people. He doesn't need the people. He's the Creator.

He made all things, He made all people, but He doesn't need them to be fulfilled in and of Himself. And yet He moves all through history to where humans are in their rebellion, their selfishness, their desperate wickedness, and He calls out to them, turn from your ways, I would have mercy on you. Amazing the way that God acts. God is the agent moving into humanity all through its history to bring redemption. Word word, and that is the word arise.

[14 : 28] Okay, arise. This occurs three times in the passage. In verse 2, God says to Jonah, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city.

So He wants Jonah to do what he's been telling him to do. Second one, in verse 3, so Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. And again, Jonah's just, he's acting according to what God says for him to do.

And then, really interestingly in verse 6, here's something of the way the king is impacted. Now I've already kind of touched on this, but look at the dynamic change that happens to the king here in verse 6.

The word reached the king of Nineveh and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. So the message had such an effect.

The message of repentance had such an effect that the king didn't have to do anything. He was the boss, he himself stood up and he stood up in order to get rid of the symbol of his kingship and his power and his authority and him being the boss, took it off, threw it on the ground and he repented. [15:44] He covered himself in sackcloth and ashes. He feared the word of the Lord. He realized that without his turning, he faced ruin and his people did too because God, as he was convicted, was mighty and powerful to do what he said he was going to do.

So the king himself arose and stood up. So I want you to see what happens here in this passage. As we go through and we see the progress of what Jonah's called to do and all that happens as a result of that, all that happens, evil and wickedness is put in its place.

Now that's no small thing, is it really to say? That's no small thing. Look at what he says, in his decree, let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, let them call out mightily to God, okay, we've seen that.

Then he says, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. That's a really big deal because these were amongst the nasty people in that known time and culture.

These are the people he didn't want to get in their way. They did great violence. They did great destruction. Huge wickedness was found amongst them and yet the word of the Lord moves them to the point where they fear him, to the point where they say, the king says, put off your wickedness, turn from the way that you're behaving and do this no more.

[17:08] Now that's a good thing. God has the power to intervene in culture to halt evil. Now I wonder if you believe that tonight because we look around the world and it's very troubled.

We see places where there is great wickedness seemingly kind of running right and sometimes you even think that in your own life sometimes you think, this is desperate.

Things are really desperate at the moment in the way that my life is going or the way people impact on me. And of course sometimes the predominant way in which people think of God is so twisted nowadays that they actually think of God as being the terrible one.

So a couple of high brow kind of famous opinions on God nowadays. Stephen Fry had a famous interview a couple of years ago where he called God monstrous which is desperately sad, desperately sad.

And Richard Dawkins calls God arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. What that shows is that they don't know God. They don't know him.

[18:24] They don't know what he's like and what he does. They haven't seen this, the work of God coming to an evil, evil culture intervening and calling to account sinful human beings and saying, stop this or you face my judgment with the result that the wicked deeds that people did, the man's inhumanity towards man is ceased at this point in time, at this moment in time in culture.

God is able to do this and to break it. Now of course there are times in which he does this in different ways in history and there are times in his own providence in which he withholds his hand. But we'll come back to this, he will deal with all of the evil that has ever been perpetrated.

But we'll come back to that. See thinking out and bringing out these three words kind of reveals to us that God's Word as it's repeatedly proclaimed consistently and compellingly down through the ages always calls for a response.

It doesn't just go out into the ether. You don't hear it tonight and just kind of shrug it off or please don't because the Word of the Lord is the most significant communication you will ever hear.

It calls you to account. It opens up the reality of your heart and your own sinfulness and it calls you to change and to turn.

[19:51] We think about sometimes when somebody gives a command and it's not heeded and we think that's really inappropriate, I speak to my five-year-old daughter and I say do this or don't do that and she does the exact opposite of what I want her to do and I say how dare you?

That's completely inappropriate that you completely ignored my command to you. It wasn't right. There was a disconnect there. I know she's in danger because she's going to do something daft and I say don't do that and she does it.

That just doesn't make any sense. There are times in which for us to hear and not respond doesn't make any sense. And so when we hear the Word of the Lord.

So I want to ask you tonight whether or not you're open or closed to hearing the Word of the Lord. It's a very, very simple question but it's very, very significant.

We go back just by way of tying these things up a little bit. We were thinking at the start about advertising and the way in which messages are given out by different companies changing all the time, trying to move you to do this or that.

[20 : 54] Let me tie together what would God have you hear tonight? What would he say to you? What is he saying now so relevantly into our culture which thinks maybe that he's very irrelevant?

Well, the first thing to say is that he absolutely does and will deal with evil.

So there will be a day when he will call every single human heart to account for the way in which that person has lived their life. Okay, that's just a fact that it's asserted all the way through the Bible.

The second thing I want to say is he will judge those who have done evil and who have never repented of that. But he will also bring in a day of unparalleled blessing and peace and wonder.

And that is because on the day when he deals with evil and judges wickedness, he will also bring his people who have clung to him and trusted in him into his heavenly kingdom.

[21 : 58] And so sometimes, you know, when life really, really is unbearable and you really do feel oppressed, then you need to know that.

That God is with you now, but that he will one day, he will one day bring you into a place of unparalleled peace where everything is righteous and good and you know no fear, you know no fear anymore.

He will do that because of what Jesus has accomplished. That's then, what about now?

Well we should also hear from the Lord in the here and now amongst all of the muck of life still, our own sinfulness and when we feel surrounded by a culture that dishonours rather than honours God, the role of the church, who are we to be?

Who are you to be? Who does God call out to you to be? A community of light, of peace, of grace, of people who have heard the word of the Lord.

[23 : 08] So if you have heard the word of the Lord and responded and turned, if you know of the salvation that has been accomplished by Jesus, then that is an absolute game changer as a society.

There's nothing more radical than a community of people who've been brought back into fellowship with God and who live according to the light of his counsel. That means that amongst you, there should be a wonderful fellowship and blessing in him, in Jesus, as you keep in step with the Spirit. And the world should see something of that. Now they may hate it, but they may turn as they see evidence of the gospel at work in his people.

So I think God is calling us to see again his power. He has dominion over the nations. He will call all people to account. He will one day create a society of perfect peace.

And now he's calling the church to live up to the calling of being the church, living in light of the fact that Jesus is Lord. Again, that word arise that we've been looking at, sometimes we lie down and we feel so overcome by fear as a church.

[24 : 22] And we think we're oppressed on every side and we think we have no voice and we think we're going to be overcome. He would say to you, rise, stand in the knowledge of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and hold fast to his teaching and live out the gospel amongst yourselves.

Arise. And what that boils down to an individual level is this, just a couple more things. Jonah was tasked with going to this awful, sinful people who he despised and hated.

And he was called with, he was tasked with calling out to them with the gospel, essentially the gospel message. The message of repent and turn and receive mercy.

Sometimes the church can behave like Jonah did. I don't want to go to those people. They're not the kind of people that I think should inherit or be blessed by the mercy and the grace of God.

That must never be the case. We do not have the right to behave like that. So we're called to take very seriously the call to make disciples and to pray for and to long for the transformation of people who need to know the mercy of God.

[25 : 33] So do you pray for that and long for that? And are you willing to be a part of that? And the second thing is, are you contributing to the life of the church, the way that the church should be now a place of peace and forgiveness, a place of mercy?

How can we be a community of people who are better towards one another, who are going behind one another's backs, or who are totally disinterested in one another if the Lord of the universe was interested enough to show compassion and to put in place a plan of salvation that would result in your being changed from desperate sinner to family member.

How can we be disinterested in one another? So we're called to recognize that again and to live out what it looks like to be a part of God's church.

So this is, just to finish, I think I've said that before, this is personal and compelling. I think it's sometimes easy to say, Jonah, he preached in Nineveh and Ninevites were these kind of people and they were bad, extra bad.

They're like these kind of people nowadays who are extra bad, the kind of people that we want to keep our children away from, we don't want to associate with. Now that's right, there are some desperately wicked people in our society today.

[26 : 54] And yet God calls all to account. And so God calls murderers and tyrants, kings of tyrannical nations to account, and he has the power to change them in an instant.

Never stop believing that God can change people that you don't think he can change now. Pray for people that you don't think he can change. God has the power to call murderers and tyrants to account.

God also calls gossips and people who hate and liars and people who are disinterested in him to account.

So that's people like us, isn't it? All kinds of people, the sins that we don't think are so big a deal. So it's personal and compelling, hear the word of the Lord, turn, repent.

But it's also good, and that's what I want to finish with. Remember the Psalm we read from?

Remember the Psalm that spoke about the blessing, the relief, the joy of being honest before God and turning from our stubborn, selfish hearts to open ourselves before the Holy God and follow his way.

[28 : 13] Remember the joy that was in that Psalm? Maybe that seems very far away for you just now. But consider this, what happens when you repent, you turn from self and you turn to the Lord, is you put yourself in the path of Jesus Christ.

So Jesus, the eternal Son who was forever in fellowship with the Father and the Spirit before he came into the world, in perfect, wonderful fellowship.

As he came into the world, not one second of his earthly life did he walk outside of the will of God, perfectly in step with the will of God at all times, perfectly blessed.

You know, he was a man of sorrows, but he was perfectly blessed in the sense that he knew he was doing the will of God. And of course, he knew the joy of resurrection and ascension and of seeing his church being able to be brought in because of what he had accomplished.

To turn from self and to turn to God and to follow his way puts us in step. You know, the Bible speaks about keeping in step with the Spirit, walking with him.

[29 : 17] Follow the way of Jesus. Know his fellowship, know his face, see him for who he is, and walk in that way. It's so much better than holding on to sin, letting it corrupt the way we live and think, the way we impact other people, the way we let ourselves down, which essentially ends up with us living in the mud.

It's good news for us. And so, let's, as this city so improbably was humbled and called to account, let's deal with our own hearts again.

The repentance is an ongoing thing. It's a daily thing. It's a blessing. And it's also something that we should, in great humility and love and compassion, pray for and seek after for all the people that surround you in the life that you live.

I'm going to leave it there. I'm going to pray and ask that the Lord would help us to do this. And then we're going to sing. So let's pray.

Lord, we thank you that you're the God of mercy.

[30 : 38] You're the holy God, but you're also the God of mercy. We thank you for the ways in which we see evidence of your will at work, changing people and bringing them from darkness to light.

We pray that tonight, if that's our life, if we're Christians, that we wouldn't be dull to that. It's so terrible when we can become complacent as to how you've worked in our lives. And we also pray that you would help us to see your power and your might and your holiness. And we pray that you would work here in Edinburgh to bring people to see your holiness and to see your loveliness and your mercy. In Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. Amen.