

God's Unexpected Magnanimity On Jonah 3:1-10

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Jonah received a message from God to preach to the city of Nineveh. Because he didn't find God's message pleasant, he went on the run. But God's message would not be denied. So, Jonah landed in the belly of a whale, where God showed him great mercy and eventually returned him to dry land where he could continue his journey. Arriving in Nineveh, Jonah fulfilled his calling and preached to the Ninevites.

A few notes about Nineveh here are in order. Many people have problems with this story because of how Jonah talks about Nineveh. The story talks about Nineveh being a "three-day" city. The king James says it was "an exceeding great city of three days' journey." The problem here is that the ruins of Nineveh that we have found don't indicate a city anywhere near that size. It was big, but it would never have taken a three-day journey to cross.

Many scholars, however, believe that Jonah was referring to the administrative district around Nineveh. At that time in the Assyrian empire, the powerful kings had given way to weak kings who abdicated much of their power to strong local administrators. These local governors paid homage to the king, but essentially ruled as they saw fit. This helps explain the reference to the "king" of Nineveh. There was no true "king" of Nineveh; Nineveh was a city in Assyria, and the king of Assyria was based elsewhere. The "king" of Nineveh was most likely the local governor who ruled like a king. These historical notes may not be of much importance to most of us, but it's important to know that the Scriptures hang together in a reasonable manner.

Now, as for the story, what we see here is an example of God's great magnanimity. My *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* tells me that "magnanimity" is the noun version of the adjective "magnanimous," meaning "loftiness of spirit enabling one to bear troubles calmly, to disdain meanness and revenge, and to make sacrifices for worthy ends." That's a good description of God's gracious treatment of the Ninevites. These were the enemies of Israel who had dealt ruthlessly with God's people in the power politics of the ancient Near East.

First notice that God's magnanimity comes in the form of proclamation of his message. God's calling is to "proclaim" (Jon. 3:2). In Jonah 3:4 Jonah starts to proclaim his message, and upon hearing the proclamation the Ninevites

believe and repent. Then in Jonah 3:6, when news of what had been proclaimed reaches the king, he repents and issues his decree. Therein lies a major part of God's mercy: he gives us proclamation.

The community of Pharr, Texas, had long been wrestling with its elementary school. It was a very poor community, and the teachers were deeply burdened with all the attendant social problems that come from poverty. The neighborhoods from which the children came had no paved roads, no sewer systems. The teachers, in an effort to improve education, went to the homes of their students to talk with the parents about their hopes and dreams. They came back in tears over the deplorable living conditions of their students.

They began to gather groups of concerned parents to discuss how they could improve the community as a whole. The church became involved, and thus began Valley Interfaith, which has worked to transform the community. In those early meetings, they brought the parents together in small group meetings and asked them to share their concerns. At one of these gatherings was Mr. Ortiz. After listening a little while, Mr. Ortiz erupted in anger. He shouted about how the people who worked for the district only cared about their next promotion, not about the community. Then he turned and crossed his arms with a scowl. He was legendary for such eruptions, and he had been complaining about the situation for years. The facilitator was very wise. She simply said, "It's obvious that you're angry about things at the school. I'm angry, too, because I want my daughter in special ed. to get the things she needs, but the district is cutting back. Can you tell me a story about something that happened to make you so angry?" When asked for his story, Mr. Ortiz melted and talked about his older grandson who had been hit and killed by a car outside the elementary school many years earlier. From that point, group frustration with Mr. Ortiz melted into empathy. It was one of those defining moments that solidified the group, and the aggregation of such moments created the impetus for positive change in the community. Father Alfonso Guevara, a leader in Valley Interfaith, says, "We make private pain public." Proclaiming the stories of private pain makes a difference.¹

Proclamation of truth can make a profound difference. It can reshape entire communities. If the proclamation of one man's personal stories can make such a difference, how much more can the proclamation of God's truth make a difference? It is God's proclaimed truth that we believe ultimately changes lives. Paul makes this point in Romans 10:14-17:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How

¹ Putnam, Robert D. "Valley Interfaith" in *Better Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”
Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”

This is why I stick so close to the Scripture. My ideas and interests aren't enough to change hearts and minds, but the word of God is life-changing. Hebrews 4:12-13 says,

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

God's proclamation is life-changing. In Jonah's day it was the proclamation of a word given directly to him; in our day it is the proclamation of the Scriptures, which is God's word to us. This book is the most electrifying book in the world, and if you are unmoved by the message of the book, then you have cause to tremble.

Notice how the people of Nineveh respond. In Jonah 3:5-8 they declared a fast and put on sackcloth. The governor took off all his finery and put on sackcloth with all the rest, and he instructed everyone to “call urgently on God.” He told them to give up evil ways and violence, saying, “Who knows? God may yet relent.” Notice this immense sorrow for wrongdoing and a turning away from it? They are emotionally struck, cut to the quick, and they intend to change their behavior.

This past spring, Glenn Thorpe, a student at the prestigious Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut, dropped a bomb on the entire community. He wrote an editorial in the school paper exposing the underculture of “epidemic cheating” that has come to dominate the elite and highly competitive school. He decried the “ruthless” pursuit of grades over knowledge and expressed disgust over his classmates’ “upside down priorities.” After a period of shock and denial, parents and administrators began to do something. To their surprise, they found many students who were relieved to have the subject out in the open and eager to help stamp out the behavior. The students arose and said they had enough and it was time to stop.²

When truth hits home, when it cuts our hearts, it prompts a response. The greater the truth, the greater response.

I just received a letter this week from Ilya and Pnina Lizorkin, our missionaries in Philadelphia. Ilya writes,

² “Elite school tries to confront cheating,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Nov. 26, 2003.

We have a great story to report to you that happened this past month. You may recall that we asked you to pray for Ulan Jakupbekov (an ethnic Muslim from Kyrgyzstan), that he will continue to grow in his newfound faith. That prayer is being answered before our eyes every day. He is growing and taking responsibility of being a servant of the Lord. We also asked you to pray for his wife Mira to come to faith. She was very angry with Ulan about becoming a Christian, and was strongly determined to divorce him and return to Kyrgyzstan. She did everything she could to get him away from Christ, but instead his faith continued to grow.

About a month ago, we received stunning information! Mira reported that Jesus appeared to her in a vision and spoke with her. "He told me that I must follow him," she said. She came to him in repentance and faith, and now has been serving at Rock of Israel, assuming some ministry responsibilities! She called her mother, who is also a Muslim. She was terrified that her family would disown her if they knew she placed her faith in Jesus. Instead, her mother said, "Well, if Jesus appeared to you and told you to follow him, then you must do just that! Call all your sisters and tell them about it!"

Ilya goes on to say,

You have to understand something: We are Presbyterians. We don't do visions that often. So it's difficult for me to take this one from Mira. But I thought I would tell you about it anyway.

Jonah 3:10 tells us that when God saw their changed behavior, he didn't destroy Nineveh. Instead, he prospered them! Again we see the truth that God loves to show mercy:

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 (Jer. 18:7-8).

So, what does all this have to do with believers? After all, we don't need to be converted like the Ninevites. But for many of us, our Christian lives have become routine. In the ongoing treadmill of our lives, Christianity has become simply another item on our "to do" list. God's message is supposed to cut to the deep parts of our soul and elicit a heartfelt response. But for many of us, getting through the day is hard enough without adding things like prayer, and going to church on Sundays feels like a chore. Even our important holidays are often more work than pleasure. As one of my colleagues quipped, "Have you noticed

that when people say, 'Are you ready for Christmas?' they say it with the same tone as 'Are you ready for your colonoscopy?'" The wonder, the magic, the exhilaration is gone from many of our Christian lives. And we exert all this effort to try to revive the wonder in our lives. There's almost a desperation about it for many of us. Deep down, we know we ought to have a deep visceral response to the gospel, but we seem to be missing it.

I suggest it is partly because we forget God's proclamations. We forget that "Repent!" means "You have an opportunity to be blessed by God's unbounded magnanimity!" We forget that "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men!" means quite simply that, through Christ, God isn't mad at us anymore. We forget that we owe Jesus our allegiance because "Jesus is king." We forget that when Jesus' challengers asked him to prove himself with a sign, he didn't provide them with the compelling evidence they desired. He didn't even respond with smooth, well-prepared apologetic arguments. Instead, he answered with a proclamation:

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here (Matt. 12:29-31).

My hope for you is this: that you will be struck once again with the eye-popping, jaw-dropping wonder of Jesus Christ, that God's proclamation about Jesus would so grip your heart that you would release everything to him. All that bad stuff we all have bottled up within, all the anger and disappointment, the hurt, the fear, all that stuff that you know is bad and destructive and sinful but you can't let it go — Jesus came so we could let all of it go. Won't you take some time to reacquaint yourself with the wonder, with the savior and the king? You think about that. Amen.