The Grace That Transforms
Jonah 2:10-4:1

So as we've seen, Nineveh was one of the leading cities of Assyria - Israel's arch-enemy and the rising super-power of the day, and her people had given a whole new meaning to the word *brutality*. And incredibly, God has called Jonah to go and preach to them. But Jonah didn't want to go. Jonah's a nationalist, his country, his people, his race, his religion, meant everything to him, and he knew that if God was calling him to go there then there was every chance that God would be gracious to them and grant them repentance and Jonah didn't want that. He wanted Nineveh condemned and destroyed. And so he ran.

But as we saw last week, Jonah's running away led him on a downward spiral to the gates of hell. He thought he was going to find freedom, but it ended with him knocking on death's door. But in His mercy and grace, God rescued Jonah from near drowning by having him swallowed by a great fish.

But as the story continues Jonah faces two more tests – how will he react when he's called to go to Nineveh again, and how will he respond if his worst fears come true. Three points: A second chance; poles apart?; the message that transforms.

A Second Chance
Now, I don't know about you, but when the fog comes down in these autumn months, it can get pretty depressing. We can go days without seeing the sun, and my mood can become as grey as the sky. And whilst I'm not into lounging on a beach being roasted in the sun, the thought of an afternoon on some Mediterranean beach somewhere seems very attractive.

But not if you find yourself in a pile of whale vomit. Which is where Jonah finds himself.

Jonah's been to hell and back. He's endured a near drowning. He's experienced an incredible rescue. And then he finds himself vomited out of the fish, onto some beach somewhere. And in some ways, Jonah is back where he started. But in another way, everything has changed – and I don't just mean his smell. He's like a man who's been brought back from the dead. But this is where the crunch comes.

Chapter 3:1-2: '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."'

Now that is almost word for word like the first call in chapter one. It's identical, except for two important differences. Firstly, there's that little phrase 'the second time.' In God's love for this man, God is offering Jonah a new start, the opportunity to start over, to have the slate wiped clean, to begin again.

But the second difference is the message. In the first call in chapter one, God says, 'call out against it, for their evil has come up before me' (1:2). But this time God says, 'call out against it *the message that I tell you'* (3:2). It's as if God is saying, 'I'm giving you a second chance Jonah, but this time, do as I say!'

Now how does Jonah respond? V3, 'So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.' This time Jonah does do as God says. This time he does go, and given that this journey is 900mile trip across a desert this is no mean undertaking.

So why does he go this time, when before he fled? Why the change? Does he just want to avoid the consequences of running away again? Proverbs 26:11 says, 'Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.' And maybe Jonah just doesn't want to repeat his folly because he doesn't want to find himself back in that fish. He's learnt that lesson. Once was quite enough for one life.

And thinking through the consequences of sin – and not wanting to go there - is one way to change our behavior. The problem is it may not deal with the root issue, which is the heart. Just think about it: Jonah may not run away this time because he doesn't want to experience the belly of the fish again, and we might turn away from something we know to be wrong because we think, 'what will others think of me if I was found out, or what financial loss might I suffer if I did that, or think of my self-esteem if I sank that low.' And we weigh the consequences of our decisions. But if you notice, all of those have 'me' at the centre. And the result of that kind of thinking is that we tend to become even more self-focused, and self-centred – because this is about *me* - and in the long run it can feed, rather than starve the underlying issue of our disobeying God, which is 'I want to do what I want to do'. So obedience for fear of consequences is not the same as heart transformation.

Or maybe Jonah's simply afraid to push his luck a second time. Maybe he goes this time because if he's afraid that if he tried to run again, and encountered another storm and got thrown overboard and sank to the bottom a second time, this time God wouldn't rescue him. So, does Jonah go because he's simply afraid to die? Well, what's interesting about Jonah is that he has never been afraid to die. It was him who told the sailors to throw him overboard in the first place, and in chapter 4 we're going to discover that Jonah would almost still rather die. So it wasn't just fear of death.

Something else has happened to Jonah to get him to the point of going, and that is that he has experienced God's grace and he knows it. As we saw last week, as he was drowning he realized the horror of what permanent separation from God would mean, and that though he didn't deserve it, God had rescued him from that and that was why he could pray from the fish, 'I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!' (v9). Jonah is able to say 'yes' this time, out of gratitude for God saving him. It was grace that offered him the second chance and grace that enabled him to seize it.

And the same is true for you and me. You see, whether like Jonah you're staring past failure in the face, or you're struggling with some area of your life that's out of control and got you by the throat, or you realize – like Jonah realized – that you are separated from God and His love, then you can wonder, is there any hope

of change, any hope of starting over? And the message of the gospel is 'yes there is'.

Perhaps the best known verse in the whole Bible is John 3:16, 'for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' You see, whilst here God sends Jonah, years later He sends His Son, the One Greater than Jonah. And Jesus didn't need to be asked twice. And just as God rescues Jonah from perishing and gives him a second chance, so Christ has come to rescue us from our past and our present, and give us the opportunity to start over.

Now when you believe that and put your trust in Jesus for the first time it unleashes a profound, life-changing power that Jesus says is like being born again. But as we go on believing it, and trusting in what Jesus has done for us, it continues to unleash that same life-changing power. As we experience God's grace and love and let it sink deep into our hearts, then it gives us hope to stand back up in the face of failure, because we know that He loves us inspite of our failure. And it gives us the ability to make different choices and turn from sin – not in ways that feed the problem of us wanting to be the boss, but out of deep gratitude for what he has done for us.

So Jonah's change of heart can only really be explained by a heart that's starting to change – he's experienced something of grace. But as he goes to Nineveh you wonder, how different is he really, and how different is he from the Ninevites themselves?

Poles Apart?

Now on the face of it Jonah and the Ninevites are poles apart culturally and religiously. Jonah is a deeply religious Jew, a worshipper of just one God. The Ninevites are polytheists – worshipping a whole pantheon of idols.

But if you scratch below that surface you realize they aren't that different at all.

You see, the Ninevites were horrendously violent and brutal, and they boasted of it. But their brutality was simply an overflow of what they worshipped. One of their idols was Ishtar - the goddess of war, and in their myths their pantheon of gods warred against each other. So if that was what they were worshipping – violence and war - it's no surprise their society went the same way. After all we inevitably become like what we worship.

But look closely at Jonah. Is he so very different? On the face of it yes he is – he's a deeply moral, religious man who wants justice against these Ninevites. But look how it expresses itself. When Nineveh does repent, 4:1, 'it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.' So angry, in fact, he could die. In fact, the Hebrew actually says, 'it was exceedingly evil to Jonah.' Jonah sees God granting these Ninevites repentance as evil. In his hatred Jonah sees white as black and black as white.

But why does Jonah get so angry? Because in that moment other things mean more to him than God. Jonah's nationalism, his religious and cultural pride, his moral uprightness, his love of country mean more to him than God, and when those are challenged he gets angry. You see, Jonah is being shaped by his idols just as much as the Ninevites were. And whilst the Ninevites were prepared to kill for theirs, Jonah was prepared to die for his.

But just consider, if Jonah is not so very different from the Ninevites, are we so very different from Jonah? Now Jonah's idols are probably not going to be yours. But just take his anger as an example, what's going on when you get angry? – whether you're given to cold clinical English anger or hot, emotional American anger. We get angry when our reputation, or our desire to be at the centre of things, or our need to be in control, or our want to have our own way, is threatened. Those are our idols that at that moment are more important to us than God – they are defining us more than our security in Christ, that He's protecting and guarding us.

And Jonah's deep anger finds its source in religion, moralistic religion. Despite what he has so recently experienced of God's grace in the belly of the fish, he still considers himself a cut above the Ninevites. And there's the danger for us. Because when religion is not mixed with a humbling sense of our unworthiness and of God's grace, it can result in just that same judgementalism and anger and violence that Jonah demonstrates. Even if it's just the violence of words.

In his little book called Man Overboard, Sinclair Ferguson who is a Scottish Presbyterian minister tells a story of visiting a friend on a hospital cancer ward, and at the end of the ward in opposite beds, were two young men. And these two lads clearly supported opposing football teams, Rangers and Celtic. And their beds and the walls around their beds were covered in the regalia and flags and scarves of their opposing teams. And if you know anything about those two clubs, you'll know that there is a deep visceral hatred between their supporters. But there they both were, on the same cancer care ward.

And Jonah and the Ninevites on the face of it seem poles apart, on different teams. And religious, moral people who want to keep the rules, and irreligious, secular people who don't, seem poles apart, even to the point of mutual loathing. But all of us are on that same cancer care ward, all in need of healing.

The Message that Transforms

Now everything so far in the book has been leading up to this point – to get Jonah to preach to Nineveh. Livelihoods have been lost, sailors' lives have been endangered, Jonah has nearly lost his life by drowning, all to get Jonah to this point. But when Jonah gets to Nineveh all we get is a one sentence sermon. Now I know some of you would love a one-sentence sermon, but just 9 words? V4: "Yet forty more days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And you think, is that it? Is that all he said? Was that really all God told him to say? Now, maybe that is just a summary, but it's interesting, isn't it, that Jonah seems to major on the judgment to come. He just mentions the overthrowing. There's no mention of God, or grace, or the chance to repent and find mercy and forgiveness. It's just impending

wrath. Sadly, religious people who forget they too are debtors to grace can rejoice in the judgment coming to sinners. And that word 'overthrown' is the same word used for the destruction that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah. And deep down that's what Jonah wants, he wants Nineveh destroyed, he wants them overturned.

But there's a clever little play on words here, because that word *overthrown* or overturned can also mean *turned-around*. So when Moses is reminding the people of Israel about how Balaam the false prophet was hired to curse Israel, he said, 'instead the Lord your God turned [same word for overthrown] the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you' (Deut 23:5). Out of His great love for His people, God overturned, he turned around the curse into a blessing.

And Jonah knows that God's threatened wrath for their evil is conditional. Jonah wants them overturned, period. But he knows that God would rather see them turned around. Jonah wants them made into toast and God wants them transformed. Jonah wants judgment to triumph over mercy when all along, in the words of James 2:13, it is God's desire that 'mercy triumphs over judgment.'

And so, in just a 9-word sermon, the whole city is repenting. The whole city is overturned, but not the way Jonah had hoped. And the very thing that deep down Jonah didn't want to happen, happens: v5 'And the people of Nineveh believed God.' The awesome reality of divine judgment brings the whole city to its senses. They realize that God would indeed be just and right to judge them for their sins. They believed God and His word to them and that believing, that faith, turned them from their evil deeds. And they were serious about it, they fasted and put on sackcloth and humbled themselves. And you've got to see how incredibly shocking this turn-around would have been to the first readers of this book: 'The Ninevites?! Those idol-worshipping, brutal, murderous, pagans, have repented?'

And even the king joins in. V6: 'The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.' Now just compare his response to Jonah's. Jonah hears the word of the Lord and he tries to run as far away as he can. The king hears the word and he gets off his throne. Because you have to, don't you? If you realize you are the needy one, if you realize you being in control and what you have been clinging onto is part of the problem, you've got to relinquish it, you have to let go. You've got to allow God that ultimate place and allow Him to take the throne. And the contrast between the king taking off his royal robes and humbling himself in sackcloth and Jonah wrapping himself in the robe of his own self-righteousness, wrapping himself in the flag of his racial and religious superiority is stark. So, not for the first time, the prophet is rebuked by a pagan.

And the king urges the people, v8, to 'call out mightily to God.' But he also knows that this has got to be genuine. It can't just be a bit of outward, external religion. He knows that just doing penance won't do; v8 again, 'Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.' And then he says these

incredible words in v9: 'Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.'

The king knows that God is under no obligation to pardon them. He knows that God is not obliged to save them from His coming wrath. He knows that even if they turned from evil and became as good and as moral and as upright and as religious as Jonah, they couldn't put God in their debt or deserve His forgiveness, as if anything they could do could ever save themselves.

Instead the king tells the people they need to throw themselves on God's mercy. Their only hope is that God is a God of compassion and love as well as a holy God; a God of grace and mercy as well as a God of justice and wrath; their only hope is that God is a God who does not treat them as their sins deserve.

And they discover that God is just such a God. V10: 'When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he said he would do to them, and he did not do it.' As God says through the prophet Ezekiel, 'I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live' (Ezek 18:32).

But hang on, before we get carried away in the emotion of the moment, where is the justice in this? Wouldn't many of us sympathize with Jonah – is it really right that the Ninevites go unpunished? A people who have boasted in what today we would call crimes against humanity. Can a holy God, a righteous God, a God of truth really pass over sin and leave justice undone?

Well, when it comes to us we want Him to, don't we? We want His grace to triumph over His judgment. When we realize that at least at the level of the heart Jonah is no different from the Ninevites, and we are no different from Jonah, we need Him to be a God who turns away His wrath and anger at sin; or what hope is there for us? And yet, we also need Him to be a God of justice or everything falls apart and evil and wickedness win the day. So how can God's justice and His grace, His righteous anger against sin and His desire to forgive the undeserving, be reconciled?

And the answer is: in the death of His Own Son. Listen to what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 3, 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [that means declared not guilty, righteous in God's sight] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. [I'll explain what propitiation means in a minute]. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' (Rom 3:23-26).

So how can God pass over sin, how can He be both just and the justifier, how can He be both a God of grace and a God of justice? How? Because God himself, in Christ, becomes our propitiation – and a propitiation is a sacrifice that's made to turn away wrath. And so God takes upon himself, in His Son, at the cross, the

punishment and the wrath we deserve. He turns His wrath away from us and turns it upon Jesus. The only person who had no sin, who had no debt to pay, no sin to repent of, becomes our sin bearer at the cross. Jesus was overthrown, He was overturned, that we might be turned around. And Jonah gets angry at God's grace; but the One Greater than Jonah absorbs God's anger for our sin on Himself that we might experience God's grace.

You see the price of sin – Jonah's, the Ninevites', yours, mine, the sin of the upright, moral, religious person; the sin of the person who throws all that stuff off: it must all be paid for, because God *is* a just, holy, righteous God. The only question is – do we pay it ourselves, or do we turn around and look to Jesus in faith and accept His payment for us?

So wherever you find yourself on the spectrum from self-righteous morally upright rule-keeper, like our prophet Jonah, to the irreligious, throw off all the rules pagan, like the Ninevites, everyone of us finds ourself on that cancer care ward, and Christ has come to heal us. Because, as He said Himself, it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. And He didn't come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.

And He calls all of us to repent and believe the good news: that out of His love for us, He has paid the price for us, that we might be reconciled to God. And when we see both our deep need of Him, and His great love for us, then our turn around will be no less amazing than the Ninevites'. When we know that we are loved beyond measure, we can find our security in Him rather than in our need to control or fight for our reputation or demand to have our own way, and so we can turn away from anger and the inner violence when those things get threatened. And when we know and experience our own deep and ongoing need of grace, we can show grace to others who don't deserve it and so turn away from judgmentalism and bitterness and resentment.

And as we see the power of unexpected and underserved grace in the lives of these Ninevites, it should give us real hope. Hope for ourselves, hope for our city, hope for the people we know. Because if these Ninevites can repent and believe and find grace, anyone can.