

# God's Mercy is Unbeatable

Jonah 3:1-10

7 May 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

**Big Question:** Can I be too bad for God to show me mercy?

**Big Idea:** God's mercy is greater than our sin.

We're in a short series in the Old Testament book of Jonah.

When most people think of Jonah, the first thing that comes to mind is 'whale'.

After this series, when we hear 'Jonah', I hope the first thing that comes to mind is 'God's scandalous mercy'.

Chapter one shows that God's mercy is unstoppable.

Jonah was given a mission to go and preach a message of judgement to the people in the city of Nineveh.

He decided he wasn't going to do that though and instead sailed off in the other direction.

God wasn't going to be stopped – through Jonah's disobedience, the sailors experienced God's mercy.

Then, in chapter two, we saw that God's mercy is unexpected.

Despite Jonah's rejection of God, when the waves were crashing down on him and his head started to go under the water, he called out the Lord for help.

God heard his prayer and rescued him in the most unexpected way – using a giant fish to bring him back from the brink of death to life.

The story's still not over though.

This week, we'll see that God's mercy is unbeatable.

Chapter three shows us that:

**God's mercy is greater than our sin.**

This can be seen through:

- A Reluctant Prophet
- A Repenting City
- A Relenting God

## A Reluctant Prophet

At the end of chapter two, we saw that although Jonah was having a whale of a time, after three days God commanded that he be turfed out of his floating hotel.

The chapter finishes with him washed safely up on a beach in a pool of whale vomit, 2:10.

Once he's back on dry land, we expect that Jonah will carry on with his mission, especially after the miraculous rescue he's experienced and his vow to "make good" in 2:9.

Perhaps that's why most people seem to assume that the fish landed him somewhere near Nineveh – that God was using the fish to rescue him and send him on his way.

The biggest problem with that idea is that Nineveh's a long way inland – it's nowhere near the sea!

The book of Jonah reminds me of a German movie called *Run, Lola, Run*.

You probably haven't ever heard of it.

It's about a woman who has twenty minutes to get 100,000 Deutsche Marks to save her boyfriend's life.

Through the movie, the story repeats three times.

Each time, something small changes at the beginning which leads to a chain of events that have massively different repercussions as the story unfolds.

Chapter one and chapter three of Jonah are a bit like that.

There's a complete reboot and re-run at the start of chapter three.

Rather than the mission carrying on, like we expect, it's like someone's hit the repeat button and we're back to the start of chapter one.

Jonah's still a reluctant prophet.

Rather than going on to Nineveh, it's more likely that Jonah returned back to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

I suspect that Jonah thought that he'd had a bit of a win.

He's successfully dodged the mission God sent him on.

Perhaps God's come around to his way of thinking – that the Ninevites don't need a prophet.

Jonah's given up on Nineveh, but God clearly hasn't.

God's determined that his prophet is going there, so go there he will.

There's a sense of *déjà vu* as God's word comes to Jonah again – a second time – in verse one, just like it did in 1:1.

*Jonah 3:2 (NIV)<sup>2</sup> "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."*

The difference this time around is that Jonah's not told what he's got to say.

In 1:1, he was told to preach against the city:

*Jonah 1:2 (NIV)<sup>2</sup> "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."*

In round two, he's not told the message, just that he needs to his skates on and get going.

God will give him the exact words to say, but he'll only give Jonah those words when he's on his way.

Despite his seeming reluctance this second time around, God's prophet seems to have learned that when the God of the Universe says, "Go," it's better not to say, "No."

So, he starts out on the 885km journey to Nineveh.

That's no small feat.

It would've been a packed lunch and a waterbag jobbie – probably taking at least three weeks.

He was heading for Nineveh, which certainly wasn't a small place (at least not by the standards of the ancient world).

From chapter four, we know that there were about 120,000 people living there.<sup>2</sup>

Verse three tells us that it took three days to go through it.

Archaeologists have dug up ancient walls which show the perimeter of the city was about 12km.

For comparison, Brisbane with its 2.4 million residents and is about 45km across – you can walk across it one-and-a-half days.

The three days probably wasn't how long it took to walk across the city, but how long it would take to go from marketplace to marketplace sharing God's message.

There's probably more going on here than meets the eye.

There's a hint that God was going to do something in that city through Jonah's preaching.

It's hard to miss that it should take exactly three days to preach in Nineveh, especially in light of the three days that Jonah was in the fish.

There's this theme of three days which in ancient literature is a symbol of going from death to life.

There are a few things in the Hebrew of this passage that we miss out on by reading the English.

In verse three, the NIV says,

*Jonah 3:3b (NIV) Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.*

The Hebrew can be translated two ways – either as 'great city'.

Most of our English Bibles take that to mean that it was a very big place, which it was.

Or it can also be translated as a 'great city to God'.

There's a hint about what God's about to do.

Other than that hint, everything else suggests that the Ninevites will have the opposite response.

For instance, consider Jonah's message.

Just like it's often said that Jonah repented while he was in the big fish, it's also often said that Jonah preached a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh.

Have a look at what he actually said in verse four though:

*Jonah 3:4 (NIV)<sup>4</sup> Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."*

He's basically saying, "In forty days, you're going to be toast."

Does that sound like a message of repentance to you?

Remember that Jonah's message was given to him directly by God.

The date's been set: they've got forty days before it's game over.

Jonah didn't preach a message of repentance, but of judgement.

It's probably fair to say that it was quite confrontational.

There's a pretty negative stereotype attached to the preacher who preaches the message "Turn or burn!"

If that truth confronts you, Jonah's message is a whole heap more in your face.

There was no 'turn' in his message. It was just "Burn."

"Burn you wicked sinners! God's going to give you what you deserve."

And that's almost definitely how the Assyrians heard it.

God's reluctant prophet was sent to speak a message of judgment to the people of Nineveh.

## A Repenting City

Next we see the how the people of the city of Nineveh responded.

Nineveh was a repentant city.

We know that the Assyrians had a reputation for being ruthless.

That's probably why they were able to grow into the first major super-power in history, conquering vast areas of land.

Given everything we know about them, you'd expect their response to Jonah's message to be pretty vicious.

There was every chance that the Ninevites would turn on God's messenger when they hear the message of judgement.

Jonah gets just one day into his three-day preaching tour before he receives a very clear response from them.

It isn't what you'd expect though.

The Ninevites weren't offended. They didn't respond to his message of judgement with violence.

They believed what Jonah said, just as if it was God himself who said it.

Verse 5:

*Jonah 3:5 (NIV)<sup>5</sup> The Ninevites believed God.*

Probably no one was more surprised – or more relieved – than Jonah himself.

My guess is that Jonah was speaking their language.

These were people who were used to getting their own way by using extreme force.

They weren't the kind of people who were used to asking for mercy and most of the time they weren't the kind of people who showed mercy.

God's message of judgment spoke to them.

They realised that this time they'd met their match.

No matter how strong their army was, they couldn't win against the God of the Bible.

And so they probably figured that if they couldn't beat him, then their only option was to try and join him.

Instead of tearing Jonah limb from limb, they began tearing their clothes.

They put on sackcloth instead, which was widely recognised as a sign of repentance.

They began to fast. Not eating was considered a way of seeking mercy from the gods.

If they change their ways, they reason, then perhaps, just perhaps God would change his response.

His mercy is their only hope.

It wasn't just a few people who were convicted and felt this way.

It was everyone – from the peasants all the way up to the nobles.

In fact, like many of the things in this chapter, it's all upside-down compared to the way things usually happen.

This is a grass-roots movement that starts with the ordinary people and goes all the way up to the top.

Even the king joins with them.

When he finds out about what God has said, he removes his fine royal clothes and replaces them with sackcloth.

And he makes a proclamation, verse 7:

*Jonah 3:7 (NIV)<sup>7</sup> This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.*

That’s quite an amazing turn around.

The king declares that they mustn’t just do the usual thing and just fast from food, but from drink as well.

And it’s not just the people, but the animals too.

He understands that the threat of their destruction is so real that he doesn’t want anything to risk it.

Nothing must be allowed to jeopardised their only hope, which is calling out to God.

As gentiles, the Ninevites don’t the God of the Bible – Israel’s God – by his covenant name Yahweh.

I was reading translation that instead of using LORD in capital letters like your Bible probably does, wrote YHWH in capital letters.

It stood out that God’s name appears stacks of times in Jonah but not at all in chapter three, except in the very first verse.

They might not know the God of the Bible by name like the Israelites do, but they don’t just call out to any God – “God help us.”

They specifically pray to the God – the true God, even though they don’t know him by name.

Did you also notice that Jonah didn’t need to tell the Assyrians they were guilty?

Yet, they knew. They knew that they needed to give up their evil ways, verse eight.

They recognised that what they were doing was wrong and had upset God.

And so it needed to stop.

The Assyrians were known for being cruel and vindictive.

Violence was their calling-card.

They tortured the enemies they captured in ways that a healthy person couldn’t even imagine, all for the sake of their own pleasure.

According to 1:2, it was their extreme wickedness which drew God’s attention to them in the first place.

Now they're turning away from it.

They figured that if they gave up their evil and their violence, then perhaps God would be merciful to them.

Perhaps they might not perish.

Can you imagine that ever happening in Brisbane?

Travelling around Brisbane and calling out that God's judgment is coming.

Going to a couple of shopping centres warning people about their fate because of their position before.

Only to have hundreds and hundreds of people repent on the spot.

It's beyond our wildest expectations.

Yet the Bible tells us that people like us are no less guilty than they were.

*Romans 3:23 (NIV)<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

We like to grade our badness.

We tell ourselves that we're doing okay because at least we're not as bad as those people.

But God sees all our rebellion as exactly that – rebellion against his goodness.

You think the Assyrians were bad – we're no better before God.

They didn't have a Judeo-Christian ethic built into their culture, yet they knew that what they were doing was wicked.

We sin in the face of having heard clearly about who God is and how he calls people to live.

How much more, then, should we be people who recognise our wickedness and like the Ninevites, respond by repenting and calling out to God in mercy?

May the Lord have mercy on our city, just as he did on the repentant city of Nineveh.

## A Relenting God

How would God respond to their call for mercy?

He would be well within his rights to give them their just desserts.

To bring the full force of his judgement down the people of Nineveh.

The people of Nineveh didn't know how he'd respond when they called out to God.

But we see how he responded in verse 10.

When God sees the way the Ninevites abandoned their evil ways, he relents.

God doesn't repay them like they deserve.

He shows them mercy by delaying his judgment – they aren't going to get smashed then and there.

Many people find God's change of mind difficult.

Some people struggle with the fact that God would relent – but we'll talk more about that next week.

Others find this verse tricky because it sounds like God didn't know how this would pan out.

Back in chapter one, he was going to annihilate them because of their wickedness, but now we see the opposite.

Now in verse ten, he's going to relent.

They say that he didn't know how the Ninevites would respond and so when they did repent, he had to change his mind.

That's a heresy called open theism and I don't think it's what this verse is saying.

God always intended to relent in response to the Ninevites' repentance.

That's precisely why he warned them of his righteous judgment of their wicked deeds.

He was waiting for them to seek salvation by crying out crying out to him in repentance.

It's not so much that God has changed his mind, as he's given them time to change theirs!

It's a matter of timing.

Without a prophet going there, how were they to know that the God of the Bible would hold them to account for their wicked deeds?

Without the threat of judgment looming on their horizon, they wouldn't have repented at all.

Now they've had an opportunity to respond to Yahweh directly and so he relents.

Was God lying then?

Again, "No".

In verse four, we see that God's intention to overthrow them.

There's some word-play going on here in the Hebrew.

The word that's translated 'overthrown' is the Hebrew word *hapak* (הִפִּיךְ).

It can mean "turned over" – that in forty days the judgment of God is coming to shake up the city and turn it over.

*Hapak* also has another meaning.

It can also mean "turn around" – that that in forty days, the whole city of Nineveh will be turned around.

God did overthrow Nineveh – just in a very different way to what they expected!

This shows us something about the character of God.

The God of the Bible is a forgiving God.

He's a gracious God.

The people of Israel repeatedly sinned against God, but he relented over and over again.

So, time and again, throughout the Old Testament, we hear the words repeated:

*Nehemiah 9:17b (NIV) But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.*

That's what our God is like.

What's significant about this passage is that it shows that God's not only interested in showing his mercy to the people of Israel though.

He even shows mercy to the wicked Ninevites.

God's mission is for everyone to be saved.

People from every country, with different coloured skin and speaking every language

Our God is the one:

*1 Timothy 2:4 (NIV)<sup>4</sup> who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

The Ninevites might seem like the most unlikely people to receive his compassion.

It's hard to overstate just how cruel and vicious they were.

We know from inscriptions that've been found that they not only honoured their kings for their victories, but also for their brutality.

I'm not even going to begin to describe how blood-thirsty they were.

Yet God shows his mercy on the people who'd you'd think least expect it.

He acts kindly, favourably towards people who don't deserve it.

We should be encouraged as we read this passage because it means that there is hope for us.

Every. Single. One. Of. Us.

There's no one who's beyond his forgiveness.

There's no sin that is too bad, too dark, too secret that we can't call out to God for mercy.

God's mercy is greater than our sin.

God's mercy is unbeatable.

However, we know from history that the Assyrians repentance didn't last long all that long.

By 722BC – less than 50 years later – they were back on the attack.

Just a generation later, they would come and invade the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Although they experienced God's mercy, they still needed more.

They didn't just need release from their punishment, they needed new hearts and minds, a renewing of their whole being.

In time, God sent someone who deal with our sin once and for all.

We see the full greatness of God's mercy as Jesus hung on the cross.

At the cross, God dealt with sin fully and completely.

By taking the just punishment of sin on himself.

He came to rescue people who were stuck in their sin with no way to escape – people who were lost.

*Luke 19:10 (NIV)<sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*

That's mercy.

And he does this for sinners.

Jesus didn't die for people who are good enough.

He didn't come to save people who are quite okay.

He came to show his unbeatable mercy by saving sinners.

*Romans 5:6 (NIV)<sup>6</sup> You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.*

If you trust in Jesus, you too can experience God's unbeatable mercy.

You can join the hymn writer in looking to Jesus on the cross, declaring:

*My sin – not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!<sup>3</sup>*

It doesn't matter what you have or haven't done.

God's mercy depends on what Jesus has done.

As the puritan Richard Sibbes wrote:

*"We have this for a foundation truth, that there is more mercy in Christ than sin in us."*

God's mercy is unbeatable because of Jesus Christ.

That's the glory of Jonah 3.

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<sup>1</sup> He was certainly somewhere that God would talk to him. There is some suggestion that he was in Jerusalem because of the fact that he left for the port of Joppa in chapter one.

<sup>2</sup> Jonah 4:11

<sup>3</sup> Horatio G. Spafford, *It is Well with My Soul*.

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**Big Question:** Can I be too bad for God to show me mercy?

**Big Idea:** God's mercy is greater than our sin.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the similarities and differences between chapters 1 & 3? What do they show us?
2. How would you describe the message that Jonah proclaimed?
3. How would you rate Jonah's evangelistic strategy? Do you think we should try and repeat it? Why/why not?
4. Why did the Ninevites fast and wear sackcloth?
5. Why do we find the reaction from Jonah's message so surprising? How should that inform our expectations and prayers for how God might act today?
6. Given the wickedness of the people of Nineveh, do you think it was just of God to relent?
7. Do you think God changed his mind between the start and the end of the chapter? Is that a problem?
8. How would you summarise what chapter three teaches us about God's mercy?