

Severe Mercies

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[0 : 00] Jonah 1-4 Go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. May God add a blessing to the reading of his word.

Please be seated. In Revelation chapter 7, verse 9, the apostle John receives a vision from heaven, and he sees in that vision the final gathering of God's people.

And he says, After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, and they were from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on a throne and to the Lamb.

[1 : 51] And so in that scene, John describes in heaven where he sees a multitude of people, and though they are different, they are standing together in unison.

Though they've come from all different nations, and though they've come from different tribes and different cultures, they share one thing in common, and that thing is Jesus Christ.

And their worship of him as Lord and Savior. These people are very different. But the one thing that links them all together, the one thing that bonds them in unison, is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now what does that say to us about God? Well, I think it says very clearly that God loves all people. That God saves all people. That in heaven we will be joined together with brothers and sisters in Christ from every nation, from all tribes, from all languages.

[3 : 02] And that together, we, united, will say, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on a throne and to the Lamb.

This, I think, shows us a picture of the heart of God. And we see this all throughout Scripture, Old Testament through New Testament. It's this picture that God desires that none should perish, but that all people from every place, from all walks of life, would come to him and be saved.

And wasn't this Jesus' command to us in the Great Commission? He said, Go and make disciples of all nations. This is clearly the heart of God, and it's to reach lost people.

And it's to use us in that process. What's interesting about Jesus and his earthly ministry is that he was often found seeking the worst of the worst.

Wasn't he? Often found looking for those whom the Pharisees and men like them had thought were beyond God's ability to save, and who were beyond being able to experience God's grace.

[4 : 22] If you remember, there was the Samaritan woman who Jesus encountered at the well. And if you remember her story, she had been married five times, and she was currently living with a man who was not her husband.

And Jesus pointed all these things out very clearly to her in pointing her need not to men in her lives in these different relationships, but what she needed was him. And she received him.

And what happened is she turned her life around as a result of her encounter with Jesus Christ, and then she went back to her city as a missionary. Another one who would be counted as the worst of the worst was the Gerasene demoniac.

You remember him? Who was found without any clothes on, naked and screaming and living in the graveyards and cutting himself with stones, and they couldn't chain him down.

This man was nuts. And Jesus saw him. And Jesus encountered him. This man who was one of the worst of the worst. And as a result of that, we see that after meeting Jesus, he was clothed, he was

in his right mind, and he was wanting to continue on with the Lord.

[5 : 30] But what if the Lord said? No, you go back to your home. He sent him back on a mission. You go back and you tell people about me. Then there was Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he, right? We all know him very well. He was somebody who was hated and despised in his community. A tax collector who had robbed and cheated the people who were his neighbors.

And then he encounters Jesus. And his life is transformed. His life is changed. This man who was one of the worst of the worst goes from being greedy and selfish to generous and loving.

And then there's Saul, who became the Apostle Paul. He was public enemy number one of the church. His mission in life was to put an end to the church of Jesus Christ.

And then he encountered Jesus. And again, we see this man who was considered the worst of the worst was transformed by that encounter and meeting Jesus Christ. And he had a new mission as a result, which was no longer to end the church, but to see the church grow and flourish.

[6 : 39] And God used him in mighty ways to achieve that. And so we see from these stories that there is no one who is too far gone for God to reach.

No one. And this is the heart of God. The heart of God is to seek and to save lost people. And he wants to use us to fulfill that mission.

And I believe that that is the greatest difficulty and struggle within the church today. It's to embrace the heart of God for lost people.

And so as a result of that, we are missing out on the opportunity that we've been given to be involved and to be used by the Lord in the Great Commission. And truthfully, oftentimes what we find in the church is people who don't have an attitude of Jesus as much as they have an attitude of Jonah towards lost people.

Right now, what our world needs the most is for the church to embrace the heart of God for lost people.

[7 : 52] Right now, what our church needs to be doing is to be going on mission to reach the lost with the gospel. That's what our world needs now. The world needs the church to be the church.

This world needs you to be the salt and the light that Christ called you to be. Last week, if you remember, we saw how you should respond to God's call.

And it was this, that first you must receive his call. Then you must respond to that call in faith. Third, you must reject passing that call off to somebody else.

And then fourthly, we saw that when God calls you, you must be ready to go. But now I want to focus on this question this morning. We saw clearly that that's what God does to us.

He calls us and we are called to go on mission for him. But what happens if you refuse to respond to God's call?

[8 : 55] What happens? What happens if you refuse to respond in faith? What happens if you try passing that call that God's given to you off to somebody else?

What happens if you drag your feet instead of being ready to go when he calls? We will see what happens by seeing what happened to Jonah when he refused to answer God's call and when he refused to seek the lost people whom God was sending him to reach.

And so the first thing I want us to see this morning from verses one and two is that God's command to go and reach lost people is clear. There was no doubting whatsoever that God had clearly chosen Jonah and that God was clearly calling him to go on a mission.

And he had given him clear instruction about what he wanted him to do. He tells him in verse two, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it for the evil has come up against me.

It's very clear what God is asking Jonah to do. God wants Jonah to go and he wants him to go to Nineveh and he wants him to preach to those people.

[10 : 16] Well, what does he want him to preach? He wants him to preach a message of warning that will lead to their repentance. Why would he want that for the Ninevites?

Well, we see in Jeremiah 18, 7, God says that if any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

We see here that God would much rather people experience his grace than experience his wrath. And Jonah, I believe, knows that this is the heart of God.

And Jonah knows that if he goes and that if he preaches this message to these people, that there is a chance that they will repent and they will experience God's grace.

Nineveh was founded by a man named Nimrod. And Nimrod was the great-grandson of Noah. And Nimrod was involved in the building of the city of the Tower of Babel, if you remember.

[11 : 33] And Nimrod was a Nimrod, quite frankly. He was a mean and nasty person. And so the city of Nineveh had a terrible beginning with Nimrod as its founder, and it was continuing to just get worse and worse as time went by.

It hadn't gotten any better. And then in chapter 4, verse 11 of Jonah, we see that God's heart was to reach these people. And he tells Jonah, And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right from their left?

So Jonah, it's clear, is being sent by God to these people, these people who are vile and nasty people, these people who are mean and sinful.

And God wants Jonah to go to them because they've been made in His image and because God desires that none should perish, but that all would know Him.

So we see that the command is very clear, very clear. But now the issue becomes, how will Jonah respond to that command? Well, he runs away.

[12 : 48] And there we see that there are consequences for running away from God's call in verses 3 and 4. There are consequences for running away from God's call.

Jonah rose to flee. That was his response. God says, Jonah, you go. And Jonah says, no, I'm not going to go. Jonah arises and he goes, but he goes in the opposite direction, actually, of where God was trying to send him.

It'd be like God telling you, hey, I want you to go to New York City. And you say, I'm going to go to Los Angeles instead. That's what Jonah is doing here. He's going to go in the complete opposite direction of where God wants him to go.

And what's interesting here is that Jonah's response is not typical of a prophet from God. Most of the time, the prophets of God would do what God had instructed them to do.

They would act according to his will. So why doesn't Jonah follow suit? Well, later on, we see in chapter 4, verses 1 through 3, he gives his explanation. He says, it says this, it displeased Jonah exceedingly.

[13 : 55] And he was angry and he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster.

Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live. So here we see Jonah's attitude and it was this, God, these people don't deserve your grace.

they deserve your judgment. Jonah was basically having this attitude towards God. You know, God, I don't mind you saving people, but I do mind the type of person that you're wanting to save.

I love it when you save people who look like me and people who act good like me, but these people are nasty people.

These people are sinful people. These people don't look like me. These people don't act like me.

And so if you're going to save them, then I want nothing to do with it.

[15 : 13] I would rather die instead. How tragic. And unfortunately, I think we see that happen in the church a lot. We dress in our nice clothes.

We come and worship in beautiful sanctuaries like this one. And we sing about God's grace and we mean it. But we fail to think about the people who aren't in this building, who aren't in church this Sunday morning or most Sunday mornings because they are far from God.

And if we're honest, some of us would have to admit that there is an attitude inside of us that says, you know what? God, I don't care if you save them. That's fine. Just don't bring them to church to worship with me.

We can't have that attitude in the church. Jonah was a racist. And racism has no part in God's church or in God's people.

He hated these people. And this is the danger that we face today that we could be so sour in our spiritual lives. We can be so far from the day of our salvation that we forget about how lost and wretched we were before we heard the gospel and we were saved.

[16 : 34] And what happens is we start to have this attitude of being better than other people. and thinking, you know what?

They're so mean and vile and nasty, I hope that they just die and are separated from God forever. We can't have that attitude in the church.

We must have the heart of our God who wants people to be saved. And doesn't this kind of attitude remind you of the attitude of the older brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son?

If you remember it was the younger son who acted mean and vile and nasty towards his family. He said, Dad, I don't want to wait until you die to get my inheritance.

I want it now. And then he went and spent it on loose living. And he got to the point where he had nothing. And he was feeding the pigs, right? And wishing that he could eat pig food.

[17 : 34] Then he thought, well, you know, I know that my father at least treats his servants better than this. Maybe I can go back. And he's hoping that his father will just forgive him just a little bit to give him a job so that he can eat again.

But we see from that story what does his father do? He forgives him of all of it. And he welcomes him back home. And he throws him a party.

And this is a picture of how God, our father, treats us when a lost person comes to him. He forgives you of all of your sin. All of it. And he lavishes you with his grace and with his mercy and with his love.

But what does the older brother think of all of this? He's not going to go to that party, right? How could you treat this person who was so mean and so violent, so nasty?

How could you show such love to somebody like that? You remember what the father says to him, right? He invites him to come in, but he's basically saying, you know, who are you to tell me who I can forgive and who I can't forgive?

[18 : 38] And you're missing out on one great party. And I think it also comes down to this. We see, and I've heard it said before of that story, and it's very true, that you can be lost with the pigs just as much as you can be lost in the pews.

And that's what the story of the prodigal son tells us as well. Jonah had forgotten about the grace that God had shown him. He failed to realize that without God's grace in his life, that he would be just like those people in Nineveh, without God in his life.

There is great danger for us as Christians that as we get further and further away from the day of our salvation, again, as we put on our nice clothes and gather together, that we forget about what God has done for us, and we fail to want to be used by God, to do the same, be used by him to do the same in the lives of other people.

When you disobey God and run from his presence, you are putting yourself on a downward trajectory. Look again at verse 3.

It says that Jonah went down to Joppa, and then again, he went down into the heart of the ship, and then ultimately, the sailors threw him down into the sea.

[19 : 59] You see the path that he is taking downward. When you run from God, you are sending your life on a downward trajectory. And then we also see from Jonah's response that running from God, running from God's call, will send you on a downward spiral that will lead you to discouragement, depression, and ultimately to exhaustion.

And so here in the middle of this fierce storm, this storm that is frightening, experienced sailors, the captain could not understand how Jonah could be sleeping soundly in the midst of all of this.

Why was that? How could that be? Well, I think it's this, because running from God wears you out. Jonah was running from God, and he was worn out.

That's how he could sleep in the midst of that great storm. You know, if there's something today that you know that God is calling you to do, and if you've chosen to run from it, it's just a matter of time before you are going to be wore out from running from God.

And remember this, that delayed obedience is disobedience. with God, it's either yes, yes, or no, no. There's no maybe so.

[21 : 22] There's no probably. It's either yes or no. And some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. Maybe you've experienced it, or you've seen it yourself within the church.

A lot of people who seem discouraged and depressed and exhausted, and that's because they're running from what God has called them to do, and they're unwilling to live in obedience to Him, and they're living in disobedience, and as a result of that, they are getting tired, depressed, lonely, exhausted.

While they may know peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ, a person like that is not experiencing the peace of God that comes through living obediently to Him. So Jonah is going down. He's going down to Joppa, then he goes down into a ship, and this is what I think is odd. Isn't it strange that Jonah wants to go in the opposite direction of where God is calling him to go, and it just so happens that on the day he chooses to flee and leave, behold, there's a ship that's able to take him in the direction that he's wanting to go. What does that say? Well, I think it says this, that when you're running from God, Satan will provide you with convenient ways to keep you running, to keep you spiraling downwards. [22 : 52] And maybe Jonah thinks, you know what, ah, this must be the right thing. Look at this wonderful coincidence. This boat is going in the exact direction that I want to go. I have the money to pay for the fare.

And maybe he thinks that he's actually going to escape and outrun God, but he must know if he's thinking in his right mind that that could never be. Well, why could he think that way? Well, I think it's because this, when people run from God and they get depressed and they get tired and they get exhausted, ultimately their brain goes a little dead. And so I think Jonah's going a little brain dead here. He thinks that he can actually do it, that he can actually run away from God. Some of you are running from God. You don't feel right in your spirit. You feel discouraged. And you might be thinking that the answer to the way you're feeling is to go on vacation. [23 : 55] Right? Or maybe you think the answer is to go to a different church. Or maybe you think the answer is to get a new job. But I'm telling you that it won't matter.

It won't matter. Maybe it'll seem like it's working for a little while, but ultimately somebody who has a disobedient heart is unable to outrun or outdistance themselves from God. That sooner or later you will have to do business with the Lord. And so God is going to do business with Jonah. Jonah. And he does that by sending this great storm upon him. And here I think we see something wonderful. We see God's love for Jonah and that he was reluctant to give up on him. He wouldn't let him go. You know, I think if it was me, if I was God and I had clearly given instruction like that to one of my prophets, right, and I said, this is what I want you to do, this is where I want you to go, and my expectation is you're going to go now? If I was God and Jonah said, no, I'm going in the opposite direction, I would say, forget you, right? Go ahead and go. I've got a ton of other people here who would love to hear from me and who would love to go where I'm sending them to go, but thank God that he is not like you and I. [25 : 20] That God loves this man and God will not let this man go. And so he raises up a storm in Jonah's life, literally and figuratively.

Well, why is he going to do that? Well, it's because this. God is going to use whatever means necessary that he must use in order to get this man's attention. And we see in our own lives that God has a way of getting our attention when we run from him and he will sometimes bring about a severe mercy in your life in order to pull you out of your downward path and draw you back to himself. I'm sure that some of you have sons, daughters, friends, people who are close to you and you are praying that they will be saved. And I want to encourage you to keep doing that, but maybe when you're praying for them you might add something like this. God, bring about one of your severe mercies in their life so that you will grab their attention and ultimately so that you will draw them to yourself. [26 : 42] Maybe God is calling you to a place or maybe God has a person that he's put on your heart and maybe after hearing these words you have realized that you are running from God.

When God's people answer God's call they will embrace the heart of God for the lost and as a result of that the nations will be blessed. If you've been running from God here's the good news. God loves you so much that he's not going to let you go. So the best thing that you can do is to be obedient to him, submit to what he's asking you to do and receive the blessing from being obedient to him and being used by our almighty God to make a difference in this world that desperately needs the church to make a difference in it. And so I want you to know that as your pastor these are the types of things that I'm praying for for our church. These are the types of things that I'm praying that God will do in your life. I'm praying

that our church will have a generation of young people that we will raise up who will answer this call, whom God will call and whom will answer that call.

I hope to see the day when we are sending people out into the mission field and we are helping, being used by God to encourage them to pursue that calling.

[28 : 18] And to have the opportunity as their church family to see what all God is doing. I'm praying that our church would do that in our own community.

That as a result of what we are doing here that people's lives would be blessed and that God would be glorified. That we would be a city on a hill that people look to and know that they can go to that place, no matter how far they feel like they are from God, and they will find people who will love them and who will love the opportunity to be used by God to show his grace towards them.

We've got to get this. It's incredibly important that we as God's church have the heart of God because if we don't, we have the opportunity not the opportunity, but what can happen tragically is Satan will use our inability or unwillingness to wound people severely.

And so I want to tell you a story of an example of that that I've heard. When I was in seminary and we were talking, it was a church administration class and our teacher who had been a pastor was talking about just conflict in church and the mean things that Christians can say to one another and the impact that it has on people.

And he was telling us a story about his church and how they had a ministry to a mission, a local mission for women who had had abortions. And their job was to go and you know, they often found them depressed and sad and regretting the decision that they had made and so they would go there and they would pray for them and they had encouraged them and their hope was to ultimately lead them to Christ which they were successful in doing in a few cases.

[30 : 13] One of those cases was coming to church and she was getting involved and our teacher told about how her life was just being transformed and it was such an encouragement to those who were witnessing down at that facility.

But you know what happens in a church is it's not long before your past history can sometimes come out. And people in church like to talk about your past history as if they don't have one of their own.

And so tragically somebody found out about this woman's past history. And so my teacher said that they were out in the foyer after church and they were just talking conversing a small group of them with this individual this lady.

And one of the church members came up interrupted that conversation put his arm around this woman and asked her in front of everybody have you had any more abortions lately?

That's heartbreaking. May it never be. There is nobody who is too far gone.

[31 : 34] There is nobody who is beyond God's ability to save. There is no person, there is no group of people that exist inside this world that God has created who he does not want to reach and save.

It's clear. John 3.16, for God so called, or for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And so if you're here this morning and you think, you know what, I don't feel like that church person who's been called on a mission, I feel like that person who exists outside of the community of God. I'm one of those lost people that you have been describing.

And I know myself. I know my sin. I know the things that I've done and I can't believe that God would forgive me for what I've done and I'm here to tell you and to declare to you clearly, boldly and honestly, what God's word says is that God loves you, that God will forgive you, not just of some of that sin but all of it.

How and why will he do that? Because of the person and the work of his son Jesus Christ who did not disobey God when God called him on a mission to seek and to save the lost and ultimately to die for our sins.

[32 : 57] He did not reject that mission but did it obediently, dying on a cross in your place and mine for our sins.

Three days later, he arose from the dead as proof that what he did was sufficient to pay for our sins, that we could have peace with God, that we could not experience his wrath but instead experience his love and his grace and so in a moment.

We're going to come up and sing an invitation hymn and if you have not experienced that grace but you want to, now's the time. Thank you.