

Long before Jesus turned Simon and Andrew, James and John into fishers of men, there was an event which, in a remarkable way, captured the literal meaning of this phrase.

You know the story well. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach repentance. Instead, Jonah hopped a ship heading in the opposite direction. But God caused His prophet to be tossed into the sea where He appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. After three days in the belly of the fish, he was vomited out on dry land, and at this point our text says: *“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.’”*

Talk about fishers of men. This great fish, perhaps a whale of sorts, fished Jonah out of the water to save him. Yet not only him, but also the city of Nineveh. Jesus used two fish to feed over five thousand men, women, and children. Here one fish is used to feed more than 120,000 people the Word of God, and deliver to them repentance and salvation.

Nineveh, it says, was a great city. Twice our text says this. Great in size and population. But even more, great in wickedness. The prophet Nahum calls Nineveh, *“the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder.”* The capitol city of Assyria, it didn’t just capture other cities; it tortured those it captured in ways too horrible to mention.

If ever there was a city deserving of total destruction, it was Nineveh. There was nothing in the city that was good. Nothing worth redeeming. Now, I should add these words: according to Jonah. He hated Nineveh. He, along with any decent, God-fearing Jew, despised the people of that great city. Oh, if only the destruction that befell Sodom could fall upon Nineveh! What joy would come to Jonah’s heart.

And so, we would think that Jonah would have taken delight in going to Nineveh to cry out: *“In forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown!”* But he didn’t. He ran in the opposite direction. He did not want to go there to preach the destruction of that city.

Was he afraid? No. He knew that God would take care of him. Then why was Jonah so opposed to going there? Because he knew something about God that we would do well to learn. Jonah knew that, above all, God is merciful. He knew the power of God’s Word. If he preached the Word of God in Nineveh, the people might actually repent, and God, in mercy, would spare the city and not bring disaster upon them.

And this is exactly what does happen. Jonah preached, and Nineveh repented. Every level of society repented. From the king down to the lowest servant. They all repented. And our text ends with these words: *“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.”* And the very next verse says this: *“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”*

We, at times, hear these words in our day, that “there must be a special place in hell for this person or that person.” Someone so evil in what they did, that their punishment in hell is guaranteed, and will be far worse than that of anyone else there. This is how Jonah felt about Nineveh. He was angry that it repented. He wanted them all to be destroyed and burn in hell.

Was there ever a prophet more unlike the heart of God? And yet God used him to rescue a wicked city, to save many thousands of people from hell’s destruction.

Let us be careful that we do not become like Jonah. To be like Jonah is to have the ability to pick out the great sinners around us. To be like Jonah is to determine in our minds who God should show mercy to, and who should not be shown mercy.

We may be more like Jonah that we are willing to admit. May God show mercy to us for being too much like Jonah. Not one of us deserves God’s mercy. But that’s why it’s called mercy. It’s not what we deserve. It’s what we do not deserve.

There is such great comfort here in the story of Jonah. God could not have picked a more wicked city to spare than Nineveh. Why did God choose Nineveh? To show you and me that no one is too wicked for God’s mercy. No one. If God spared Nineveh, then there is no one, not even the one who deserves a special place in hell, who is without hope.

God spared Nineveh because He refused to spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all on the cross. The wickedness of Nineveh was charged to Jesus and laid upon Him. He endured the disaster they deserved. He endured that special place in hell as He hung on the cross. Jesus did this for the people of Nineveh, and for you and me. Your sin, your wickedness, along with mine, was charged to Jesus and laid upon Him.

Are you a great sinner? And what other kind of sinner is there? Do not fear. Do not despair. It is to great sinners that God shows mercy. Great sinners need great mercy. And that is the only kind of mercy that God has in His heart.

Friend, let me be absolutely clear. You are forgiven. You are forgiven of all sin. There is no disaster, no judgment awaiting you. Jesus took it from you, from every one of you.

It’s not Jonah who is angry at this. It’s the devil. He is furious that God is merciful to you, that He has forgiven you. Let him rage just as Jonah raged. It changes nothing. God has spared you. He has forgiven you. He has saved you in Jesus Christ. Amen.