

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

January 24, 2021

Those people who are Bible critics place the book of Jonah in the section entitled *fiction*. They don't believe it, even though Jesus Himself calls Jonah historical fact. What critics find impossible to swallow about Jonah is that he was swallowed by a great fish, living within its belly for three days. Yet if they find this impossible to believe, why would they believe that Jesus rose from the grave after being in its belly for three days?

There is something even more incredible and hard to believe in the story of Jonah than his nightmarish time in the whale's stomach. We see it here in our text. After Jonah goes into the city of Nineveh one day's journey, calling out, "Yet forty more days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown..." here it is, "*the people of Nineveh believed God.*" Not one or two. Not a few hundred or even a few thousand. Everyone of them believed God. "*From the greatest of them,*" it says, "*to the least of them.*" All 120,000 within that city believed God. Now that's hard to swallow.

Jonah had a success rate of one hundred percent. Compare that to Noah. His success rate was zero. Compare that to Lot. His success rate in the city of Sodom was also zero. Even Jesus did not fare as well as Jonah. Most all of the masses who followed Him turned away and left Him. And He even says that the people to whom Jonah preached will rise up in the Judgment and condemn the people to whom He preached. Apparently, Jonah was the better preacher.

Can you imagine if pastors today had Jonah's success rate? Maybe our Synod leaders should teach us how to be more like Jonah. But wait a second. Jonah despised and hated the people of Nineveh. He ran in the opposite direction when God first told him to go there. And after he did go, when he preached his sermon, he sat down outside the city angry that God showed mercy to the people of Nineveh. Is this the kind of man a congregation would want for their preacher? Hardly. And yet, Jonah's rate of success was off the charts. Go figure.

The book of Jonah teaches us what all of Scripture teaches... that the success belongs to God and not to men. The best preacher can have the worst results, and the worst preacher the best results. And it does not matter. For when God's Word is faithfully proclaimed, the Holy Spirit will bring about the results that He desires.

There is something else the book of Jonah teaches us which all of Scripture also teaches. God's mercy is far greater than the worst sins of the worst sinners. If you are a great sinner – and what other kind of sinner is there? – then you will find comfort in the story of Jonah.

God said to him, "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city...*" And later it says, "*Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city...*" And we right away think that Nineveh's greatness was its incredible size. That's how we see it. It's how Jonah saw it.

But Jonah also knew that Nineveh was great in regard to its wickedness. It really was the worst of the worst. Take the worst 120,000 sinners in the entire world, put them all in one place, and you have the city of Nineveh. I'm not kidding.

So why did God spare this city? Why didn't He destroy them all?

God spared the city of Nineveh because He “*did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all.*” The wickedness of Nineveh was charged to Jesus and laid upon Him. He endured the disaster they deserved.

And this is great comfort for us. If God can spare the people of Nineveh, then He can also spare me. Because my sin, and your sin, was also charged to Jesus and laid upon Him.

This is true whether you believe it or not. The people of Nineveh believed. There was nothing good about them. There was not the potential to believe within them. There is no way they could have believed or should have believed. Except that God was merciful. He worked through the Word that Jonah preached. He worked repentance within them. He gave them faith to believe. That’s it, period. And you who believe, the same is true for you.

I truly hope that you see yourself as a great sinner. For it is to great sinners that God shows mercy. If you can pick out the great sinners around you, the great sinners in your church, then you are just like Jonah. And we do not know for sure that he is in heaven. But we do know that the great sinners of Nineveh are.

Great sinners need great mercy. And that is the only kind of mercy God has to give. He called Nineveh a great city because of the greatness of His love for them.

If you are a great sinner, then move the word *great* away from yourself and place it with your God, for His great love and mercy toward you knows no bounds. However wicked your past may be, God forgives you. There is no disaster, no judgment awaiting you. Jesus took it from you. You are forgiven.

And then we pray, “Lord, let me not live in the greatness of my sin, but in the greatness of Your mercy toward me in Christ Jesus.” Amen.