

Manteca Presbyterian Church

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God's Relentless Grace is Always Growing

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Jonah 3:1-10

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. 4 Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

6 When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. 7 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. 8 But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. 9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

New International Version

Recently Ford came out with a 1200 horsepower Shelby Mustang. To put that in perspective, my little Toyota has 180 horses. Can you imagine how powerful that would feel to sit at the wheel of such a car with all that horsepower under your right foot? If we trust in Jesus Christ as our savior, we have the capacity for unlimited power to glorify God and make a difference in this world.

Now you may not feel like you have unlimited power, but thanks to Pentecost, the day when God rained down his Holy Spirit upon ordinary, untrained, politically powerless people, we each have even more than 1200 horsepower to do good in this world. The reason we don't feel like we have unlimited power is because we're sitting in the showroom with the key in the cabinet not in the car. In a keyless ignition, it's only when we press the ignition button do we have the power. We possess the key of faith but we have to go out there and do something that brings glory and honor to God to experience that power. That's when we experience the power of the engine God placed within us on Pentecost.

Right now our church in Manteca is about to undertake a building project that will transform the way we interact and do worship here. It will change the way this church looks on the outside and inside. And the question arises, do we have the ability and the power to do it?

What I want to say to our family in this Pentecost season is that we have over 1200 horsepower each to do amazing things. Coupled together with one another that's a lot of power. God gave us that power but we'll never know it until we press the ignition button and fire it up. Believe it, we have power

when we seek to glorify God even with what little we have. God is then moved to give us even more. This is a powerful biblical principle of change. God can be moved and will be moved when he sees his people on the move.

We have a really great example of that in the story of Jonah. Jonah was an angry man. He was depressed, saddened because he had lost so much in his life. He had lost his home and probably his family because of genocide. He had every reason to be angry especially with the people of Nineveh who killed so many Jews. Anger turned inward is depression. He would have rather died than believe God can change things.

So do nothing and you sink to the bottom of the sea and life is over? Oh wait a minute, maybe God doesn't let you sink to the bottom. Instead you get sucked into a stinky oxygen deprived belly of a fish where you get to sit and think about it for three days before getting vomited up covered in slimy. Lovely. Just let me die.

Oh no, not so quick. Apparently God wasn't moved by Jonah's little pity party. Instead he gave him a second chance in life, a second chance to make a difference in the world. Everyday we live, our life is being extended that much more and with that day we get another chance to do something big for God. Every Sunday when the doors of this church are opened we have another chance to do something big for God. Today is our day of opportunity made possible as a gift from God. Don't take any day you're alive for granted no matter how bad things may be.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

You'll remember the first time the word of the Lord came to Jonah he was to go to Nineveh and warn them that if they didn't repent God would destroy them. That's when Jonah's anger about what the Ninevites probably

did to his family over road his love for God. He bought a ticket on a ship sailing in the opposite direction and was going to go do his own thing.

Anger will cause us to do awful things. I remember as a county jail chaplain an inmate in my Bible study telling me how in a fit of rage he went over to his girlfriend's house and tore it to pieces. That one night destroyed his future. Unresolved anger is misdirected energy that rarely ends well. Instead if we can take that same emotion and channel it into positive change we can have a huge impact for good. That's what God wants to do for us as individuals and as a church, channel our emotions. Don't just give in to anger, seek out some help and bring some good into the world.

3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.

I still don't think Jonah had love for the people of Nineveh when he went there. But he went anyway out of obedience to God and faith. That's how we have to deal with the emotion of anger. We can't always feel good about doing something. Sometimes we just have to do the right thing regardless of our feelings.

Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.

4 Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

A day's journey would have at least put him deep within this wicked city. Remember this was like a Jew going into Nazi Berlin in 1941 and preaching that the city was going to be overthrown. I can't imagine Jonah's message being very popular. But he got a surprising response, probably the one he most dreaded.

5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Fasting and wearing sackcloth in those days was a physical sign of one's inward repentance. This was a significant movement to believe God. It appears to be a city wide act of repentance.

6 When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

If hundreds, even thousands were putting on sackcloth and fasting under the king, he would have had a serious rebellion on his hands. The way rebellions were and are controlled even today is by bringing in the military. But the fact he didn't bring in the military and in fact repented himself might tell us how big this movement of repentance had grown.

7 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. 8 But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. 9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

This wannabe king could have been doing what a lot of politicians do and that is to use God or religion to win votes. He saw what was a chance to win over the hearts of the people of Nineveh against his father (who was the real king in absentia) and brother (who also wanted his job) by using God. That's nothing new with politicians. Anything to get an edge. But who knows, maybe he was genuine. Maybe this really was a widespread revival.

10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

I want you to grasp what that word “relented” means. It means God changed. But that’s not how we usually picture God is it? We usually picture God as having his ways set for eternity and nothing can change him. Is God really moved by anything we say or do? Apparently so. Why not? When verse 10 says God “*did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened*” it meant he didn’t need to bring on destruction because they demonstrated they had stopped their destructive behavior. They moved God.

What that means for a church about to undertake a major project is that it proves God can be moved and actually wants to be engaged in what we’re doing. Building a place that is welcoming to people of all ages, races, genders and economic levels is what God wants to engage in. There’s no one in this area God doesn’t love and wants to have worship him.

But we’re a small church and we don’t have a lot of money and we have a lot of expenses. How do we do this project? Do think God would be moved by that kind of whining? I’m not even moved by it. What moves God is when we repent, stop relying on ourselves and ask him for what we need. Most of us are self reliant people. We’re educated, we’re smart, and we pay our own way. None of us ever want to be in the place where we have to ask for money. Or ask for someone to help us. Or even ask for a ride.

If the notoriously evil and self reliant Ninevites who ran their own Holocaust long before the Germans, could stop and take responsibility for what they did, why not us? If they could stop and ask for help from God, why not us?

Jesus, as great as he was, lived by a short little creed that we here know well: ***Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.*** And the way we can live

out that creed is by being filled with God's Holy Spirit Pentecostal power and reminding ourselves of it many times a day.

But we quench that power when we settle for doing our own thing by our own power. Why settle for 180 horses when you have a 1200 horsepower capability? Yes, God expects us to be responsible and to take care of ourselves the best we can. But if missionaries to Scotland hundreds of years ago had had to rely only on their own family income, the gospel would never have gotten there. If the gospel had never gotten to Scotland, there would be no Presbyterian church to cross the pond and share the gospel with us. We today probably wouldn't know Jesus Christ as our Savior and would probably be worshipping some god of the wind or god of the harvest.

Let's do God's thing with God's power like Jonah did the second time around. Let's believe that when we step out to do something for God that's out of our comfort zone, there will be a 1200 horsepower engine behind us. Like the Ninevites who chose God whom they couldn't see over the military might of their country that they could let's choose the power we can't see over the means we have been trusting.

The good news is that God can be moved. God does relent. The only thing unrelenting about God is his grace for us and it's actually a growing grace. So the only way we can fail is by doing nothing. And Jonah is proof of that.

What is God calling you to do? Maybe it's to make a sacrificial gift to the cause of Christ. It's going to take sacrificial giving to get our facility functioning well. Maybe it's to donate some time that you otherwise would be relaxing in. Maybe it's to use some skill for the glory of Christ that you've never used or haven't used for a long time for his glory. Why just sit in the showroom, we have the keys, let's go. You were meant to go!

Does History Prove Nineveh Ever Had a Wide Scale Repentance?

A former pastor in my last church pointed out to me that there is no historical record showing that there was ever a wide scale repentance and turning back to God at any time in the life of Nineveh. The next time we hear about Nineveh in the Bible is from another prophet named Nahum who wrote the Old Testament book of Nahum. In that book God does crush Nineveh because they continued their evil ways. So how could Jonah chapter 3 be true that God didn't bring on them destruction because they had repented?

One theory is that it comes down to the dating of the two books of Jonah and Nahum. Historically, Jonah has been dated to the period of Israel's King Jeroboam, i.e 780 - 750s BC, whereas Nahum is dated to either shortly before (615 BC) or after (612 BC) with the fall of Assyria (and its capital, Nineveh). That would make Nahum writing at least 150 years after Jonah.

Why we believe this is that in 722 BC, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, leaving only the last two remaining tribes of Israel - Judah and Benjamin. When Jonah preached, he presumed a full, diverse twelve tribe Israel, whereas Nahum only addressed the remaining "Israel" in the sense that most people think of Israel today. The fuller complement of Israel would have been more steeped in idolatry.

If that dating is correct, God did spare Nineveh after Jonah's preaching because it wasn't for another 150 years (think the time between the American War Between the States and now) that Nahum preached his condemnation on Nehemiah. A generation would have been spared destruction.

Nahum's task, 150 years or so after Jonah would have been to encourage the final two tribes of southern Israel from prematurely giving in to Assyria. The later parts of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles tell the stories of Hezekiah and Josiah, and the constant question of whether Israel should rely on God, or trust in some bigger foreign power like Egypt or Assyria, the two big players

in the region. Imagine, for example, you're Belgium just before WWII. Do you rely on God or make peace with either Germany or France?

Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, finally was destroyed in 612 B.C. by the Medes as predicted by Nahum. After Nineveh's destruction, the site was so completely buried that it wasn't until 1842 that modern archaeologists rediscovered its location in modern-day Iraq.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH

1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal

Romans 3:23-24

2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death

Romans 6:23

3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us

Romans 5:8

4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow Him to become the master of our life

Romans 10:13

Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...

"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."