

A Second Chance

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[0:00] Good morning. Good to see you, as always. But I want you to picture something. I want you to picture that you are coming to church on Sunday morning.

You arrive at 20 past 9, which is, well, early for most of you, only to find that when you come here, there's a queue that's actually going out into the street.

And you try to get in, but you can't. It's too packed. There's too many people. There's no space left. The pews, you look through and you see the pews are packed to the brim. There's people, you know, all the children are sitting on their parents' laps.

There's no space for them. People are overflowing out into the hall. We had to set up a speaker system so they could hear. Out into the parking lot, there are people just trying to get in. You've never seen anything like this in all your time coming to St. Mark's.

And then you discover it's not just St. Mark's. It's the Baptist Church up the road as well. It's Medway Chapel a few blocks away. Every church in Plumstead is just packed to the brim this one Sunday morning. It's packed to capacity.

[1:03] People all over Plumstead who have never wanted or had any interest to go to church before are suddenly desperate to come to church, suddenly desperate to hear and connect with their Creator.

Now, wouldn't that be awesome? I hope you agree that it would be great. But would it ever happen? Ask yourself that. What would it actually take for that to happen?

What would it take for these churches to be packed to capacity, for people all over to want to hear from God, to be desperate to hear from God? What would it take for a community that is largely uninterested in God to suddenly seek Him out, to suddenly prioritize Him and to start listening to Him?

It would be an awesome thing. But I think most of us don't believe that it could ever actually happen. I think we all think that's sort of a dream, a fantasy. It seems too far-fetched.

That kind of, you know, spiritual revival on that scale in our community. Well, I want to tell you this morning that that's not far-fetched at all. It's happened before in many communities and in many places around the world throughout history.

[2:14] Sudden spiritual revivals in places where no one expected them. A couple of examples. In 1741, in Enfield, Connecticut, in America, Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon from Deuteronomy 32.

And this was not hugely different to other sermons that he preached. But the Spirit of God moved that day. As he preached that sermon, amazing things started to happen.

During his sermon, as he was describing the fate of those who faced God's punishment for their sins, he heard people starting to cry. People who were listening to him starting to sob.

More and more people started to cry louder and louder until it actually drowned out his own preaching. He had to preach louder so that people could hear him over all the sobbing. And as he continued, people started falling to the ground.

Not in some crazy trance, but just in distress for their sins against God. They were wrenched in their gut because they realized how much they had sinned against God.

[3:14] How far from him they were and what was coming if they didn't repent. You know, people who the day before really didn't care much about the things of God. Suddenly, they heard God like never before calling to them through the words of this preacher.

And afterwards, it's recorded in the town of Enfield that night. Throughout the night, you could hear people in their homes crying and praying and calling out to God in repentance for hours and hours until the early hours of the morning.

The entire town experienced a spiritual revival that day, which lasted for a long time after. And that's not the only example. There's lots of examples of revivals like this throughout history.

Another one, in the early 1500s, the Reformation swept through the entire continent of Europe with a fresh awakening of people to God's word. People started reading God's word like never before. And people started understanding for the first time God's demands on their lives. And it became so public and so common that entire cities like Zurich, for example, made it official policy to go to church and read the Bible regularly.

[4 : 27] It was law. You could be fined for not attending church. Seriously, imagine that was still happening today. Or St. Mark's wouldn't have to worry about funds, I can tell you that.

But you see, revival, an awakening of communities to God, it's real. It can happen. It's happened in history.

And it can happen again. And this morning we're going to learn about probably the greatest revival that's recorded in the whole Bible, which is the revival of the city of Nineveh.

A pagan city, a violent city. In fact, I was looking at the maps. Nineveh was where the current city of Mosul in northern Iraq is.

And that's the headquarters of ISIS. It's still a violent city, a pagan city. But thousands of years ago, that city experienced a revival.

[5 : 22] Kind of like we wish would happen in Iraq today. But we would never dream of. And yet it happened. In fact, I would go so far as to say Nineveh under Assyrian rule was more violent and more godless than current day Mosul is.

It was a violent, evil city. But it was turned upside down all of a sudden by the preaching of this prophet Jonah. But it's also in this story. Now, this is why I think it's important for us.

I think what God is wanting to say to us this morning. It's in the story that we learn what it takes for revival to happen anywhere and any age. Because we see the elements of revival here.

What are the ingredients to revival in a city? What should you be doing, praying for if you want to see revival in your community or in the lives of your friends? Or maybe even in your own heart you feel that you need a revival.

Well, let's see what happened in Nineveh. And we'll go through the story and then at the end we'll draw out some implications. But firstly, I want us to see Jonah's second chance. Now, if you've been following the story, you'll know that Jonah received a commission from God right at the beginning of the story to go to Nineveh.

[6 : 34] But he then ignored it and decided to run away. Only to realize that you can't run away from God. And he had to learn this lesson the hard way. As you'll remember, he was tossed into the ocean and swallowed by a giant fish.

Right? And that should have killed him. Okay? Most people, when they're swallowed by fish, they die. They don't survive. I grew up in Fishwick. I know this is a fact. But Jonah didn't.

Instead of Jonah's life ending there, he was, as Adrian said, as Paul said last week, he was as good as dead. And yet, he got a second chance from God.

He got a second chance. Of course, it's from God. And God is perfectly capable of doing miracles like this, like he did with Jonah, with this fish. It seems fantastical.

It seems mythical. But it's not. It's recorded as history in the Bible. Jesus recognized it as history.

And it's God who did it. And there's nothing that God can't do. Anyway, we pick it up now in Jonah chapter 3.

[7 : 35] As Jonah is probably lying on some random beach on the Syrian coast covered in fish bile, wondering what's just happened. And we read this from verse 1.

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

Now, I wonder if you have spotted the difference between chapter 1 verse 1 and chapter 3 verse 1. It says God's saying the same thing, but it's quite a different outcome, isn't it?

God's will hasn't changed. He still wants Jonah to do the same thing. What's changed is Jonah's will. It took him two chapters and quite a lot of hectic stuff for it to change.

But finally, it's changed. He's finally lined up now to God's will. Which itself reminds us something about our God, doesn't it?

[8 : 33] God, and this is a lesson we really need to know in our modern age. God doesn't change his will to match people's wills.

Like we often think he does when we pray for things. It's like we're trying to get God to change his will to want what we want. Often, we kind of see God like a vending machine in the sky.

But the truth is, throughout Scripture, we see over and over again, it's really the other way around. It's not us trying to get God to do what we want. God works in our lives and in our circumstances and often in our difficulties and pain and troubles.

Not to achieve our will, but to change us to line up to his will. Like he did with Jonah here. And it's often, as I say, it's often a painful process for God to do that.

Because by default, we don't want to do what God wants. We want to do what we want. Which is by definition, because we're sinners, it's by definition not what God wants. And so every day becomes a battle between what I want and what God wants.

[9 : 41] And that's a battle that Christians face. In fact, it's probably only Christians who face it because other people don't care what God wants. Those who have come back to God want to do what God wants, and yet they also want to do what they want.

And it's this constant battle. You know, Paul describes this battle in his own heart in Romans chapter 7. You can read that at home today. But if we learn nothing else from Jonah, we learn that God will win the battle.

God will always get what he wants. And so the sooner we line up to his will, the better for us. And if you go to sleep for the rest of the sermon, which I encourage you not to do, but if you do, I just want you to take that.

That when you go out into this week, and you will face that battle of what God wants versus what you want, God will win, even if that takes you going through a painful process to learn that lesson, it's better that you just concede to that.

He's your creator. He will win. He will get what he wants. And what he wants is best for you in the long run anyway. And so let's learn to every day line up to God's will rather than trying to get him to do what we want.

[10 : 54] Anyway, Jonah finally got that, didn't he? And when he got that, I want you to see what happens next from Jonah 3. Chapter 3, verse 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. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

Okay, let's just stop there. Jonah went to Nineveh with a very simple message. Okay, I want you to notice this was no deep theology. This was no 30-minute sermon.

In fact, this is probably the shortest recorded sermon in the Bible. It's eight words in the English. It's even fewer words in the original Hebrew. All it is, is 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Let's pray. You know, that was Jonah's sermon. It was a plain and simple warning that God is coming, God is angry, and Nineveh was in trouble.

[12 : 01] That's all that he had to tell them. And before we look at their response, let's just think, why was that the message they needed to hear? Why did God send them this judgment?

I mean, and why did he give them 40 days as well? Well, I want you to think about the purpose of any warning that we see in our lives. Today, we come across a lot of warnings in our lives.

For example, if you go outside at tea afterwards, you'll see that our neighbor has an electric fence between us and him.

He obviously doesn't want Christians on his property. No, no. He probably just wants to be secure. But you'll notice that there's warning signs on this electric fence. And the warning signs are there not because our neighbor wants us to get electrocuted.

It's because he doesn't want us to get electrocuted. Otherwise, he wouldn't have put the signs there. It's so we avoid what the warning is warning us about. That's what the warning is for. The warnings you see on cigarette packets.

[13 : 04] You know those warnings? Smoking causes cancer. Now, these warnings aren't there just to spoil your smoking experience. Like, ha-ha, you're going to suffer. Enjoy your cigarette.

No, the warnings are there so that people change their habits and that they avoid the harm that will come from a bad smoking habit.

You see, warnings. The point is, warnings are given so that what is warned doesn't take place. And it's the same with all of God's warnings in Scripture. You see a lot of warnings in Scripture.

His warnings to the Ninevites and his warnings to us today and his instructions in the Bible. They're not to ruin our fun, right? They're for our good.

We need them more than we know. We need to know what parts of our lives are not in line with God's will so that we can change, so that we can turn, that we can adapt, that we can respond.

[13:59] We need to hear that. We're not going to figure it out ourselves. We need God's Word to tell us. Because our God, and we should be thankful for this, our God is a God who is mercifully, constantly warning people and pleading people to change before it's too late.

like He did with Nineveh and like He does today. God is in the business of warning people of what's coming if they don't respond, constantly, throughout the Word.

You know, have you ever thought that if you miss church one Sunday, you may be missing out on a very important warning from your Creator to you, a correction that you need to hear for your good, that is vital for you to hear and respond to?

Have you ever thought that you may be missing out? Have you ever been lying in bed one Sunday, not at church, going, you know, what if God's got a warning for me today, which He probably has, that you need to hear? I don't think we think that, do we?

We don't think like that. But we should be coming to church not to be entertained or not to get a boost for the week. We should be coming to church to hear God speak and warn us and correct us and be ready to respond.

[15:13] And we need to make sure we don't miss those warnings for silly reasons any more than you would miss, I don't know, an announcement about an outbreak of a deadly virus and how to guard against it.

You see, sin is a deadly virus that is threatening us every day. Think about it. Say a health official knocked on your door and they show you all their credentials and they, I don't know, maybe they're in a biohazard suit to make the point.

And they say that you need to hear about a fatal airborne virus that's going around Plumstead. All right? Pretty scary stuff. Are you going to say, no thanks, I've got a sports meeting on this morning. Huh? Or are you going to say, no, well it's Sunday morning, I need to relax, I don't really want to hear about a fatal virus. Thank you very much. And close that, of course you're not. With something so vital, so potentially fatal.

But people say those things all the time about coming to church to hear God's warnings, which are so much more vital because sin is so much more eternally fatal for us.

[16:19] I mean, how many times as a pastor do I hear, sorry, I couldn't make it to church, something more important came up. Or I just needed to rest. And that's crazy talk.

Really? We should consider church each week as an appointment with God. And just as you wouldn't let anything get in the way of a doctor's appointment, how much more should nothing get in the way of your Sunday morning appointment with your Creator?

We need God's Word. We need God's warnings more than we think. And the Ninevites, these pagan, violent Ninevites realized that.

How much more should we? And when they realized that, look what happened. Look how they responded from verse 5. The Ninevites believed God.

A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, he took off his royal robes, he covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down in the dust.

[17:26] Then the king, what he does is he issues an order from verse 7 on, for the whole city to fast and to call urgently on God and to give up their evil ways and their violence.

All of a sudden, because of Jonah's eight-word sermon. Now, Jonah was probably taken aback by this response, and we should be too.

You know, he's not even there for one day yet. He's hardly started preaching. He's eight words in, and suddenly, out of nowhere, the entire city repents en masse. A huge, unexpected revival because God was at work.

And notice, it's God at work. It wasn't anything really to do with Jonah. We've got to know Jonah over the last two weeks, and we know there's nothing really admirable about him. This wasn't anything special about Jonah.

This happened because of the message that he carried and the power in that message because it was God's word with God's commission and God's authority, and when that comes on the ears of

people that God has chosen to hear it, it's powerful.

[18 : 32] God's word is hugely powerful, and it has the power to change these people, to change this whole city, and it has the power to change the heart of your friend, your family member who doesn't want to hear anything about God.

God's word has the power. You don't have the power to change him or her. God's word does, though. God's word does, as it did here. And it doesn't have to be complicated.

It doesn't have to be a lengthy sermon. It's just got to be true, and it's got to be from God. What's important, though, is to notice how the Ninevites responded to that word.

And we learn a lot from that. Notice, they responded by getting changed into sackcloth and sitting in dust or ashes, like the king did.

Now, that's a weird thing to do. It's not like, you know, at church we've got a dust pile that we encourage people to sit in, and we've got hangers of sackcloth for you to put on. But it represents something. You see, back in the day, sackcloth and ashes was a sign of mourning.

[19 : 38] It was a sign of remorse to show everybody else that you are really regretting what you've done.

A sackcloth was this rough, uncomfortable material to wear that was often only reserved for slaves. And sitting in ashes was a sign that you're no better than the dust. You're no better than the ashes. It was a sign of humility and worthlessness before God. It was an admission when they did this, the Ninevites. It was an admission that they deserved what was coming. They didn't go, well, let's try to live better and then, you know, we'll be good people.

They said, listen, God, you're right. We deserve to be destroyed. We've sinned against you, and there's no excuse. That's basically what they were doing.

But that's not all. The most important thing they did, I wonder if you noticed, they changed their behavior. All right? They didn't just go, I'm so sorry.

[20 : 40] I'm so sorry. I've done so much bad stuff and then on Monday morning go out and do it again. No. Look at the king's decree. He said, do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything.

Do not let them eat or drink, but let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone urgently call on God. let them, and this sentence is vital, let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

And you see this, this is a great little picture for what real repentance looks like, what God is wanting of people. This is a proper response to God's warnings when we hear them.

It's not just a confession of guilt, but it's a resolve to change, to make not just small changes, but uncomfortable and costly changes to rid your life of sin, which is signified by this costly fasting and wearing of uncomfortable sackcloth.

So ask yourself, seriously, ask yourself this question, what uncomfortable changes do you need to make in your life this week, this month, to turn from sin and to live for God more?

[21 : 56] That might be as simple as making sure that you are at church every Sunday morning for your appointment with your Creator to hear God's warnings. And yes, that'll mean you have to give up stuff.

What's more important to you? True repentance is uncomfortable, it's costly. It might also mean just confronting that sin that your conscience keeps telling you about, keeps reminding you of, even though you enjoy it.

And to stop it and to confront it means giving up something you enjoy. It's costly. You see, true repentance, true repentance, always means costly change.

It's expensive. So what costly change do you need to make? Because you know what? None of us are perfect. Every one of us needs to examine our lives and decide what costly changes God is calling us to make.

And we need to ask that question because it was when the Ninevites were willing to do that, when they were willing to turn to make that costly change, then something incredible happened.

[23 : 07] Look at verse 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.

Okay, that doesn't mean that God changed His mind, that God was taken by surprise. It's not like God was going, wow, I didn't expect that. Well, okay, well, I guess I'm not going to destroy them.

No, God knew what He was doing. God knew what they were going to do. God is omniscient. He's all-knowing. He didn't change His mind. Rather, this is exactly what God wanted.

This is what God intended. This is why, you know, this is why He wouldn't let Jonah get away. He didn't want to have to punish the Ninevites. But in order not to, He had to warn them first and they had to respond.

Because you see, our God is a God of both justice and mercy. He doesn't compromise the one. He's a God who upholds justice for sin but also mercy as He was then and as He is today.

[24 : 14] He must ensure that justice is done. He's a righteous judge. He must ensure that all sin is punished which will ultimately happen on the day of judgment to come. And just like the Ninevites needed to know that, this world needs to know that God is coming and God is angry.

this world needs to be warned. But, thing about this God, He gave the Ninevites 40 days and they didn't need 40 days, they only needed one.

But, He didn't want people to face His anger. He's angry for sin and He's not going to stop being angry for sin because He's righteous and He's holy and He's perfect.

But He doesn't, because that anger is so terrifying and so terrible, He doesn't want anybody to face that anger, that justice. And so, you know what He does? He pleads, He warns, He compels people to turn to Him before it's too late.

and He's willing to forgive those who respond. But, question, I wonder if you've thought about it. How can He just do that?

[25 : 23] How can He just forgive the Ninevites? They were evil people. You know, they had sinned, they had done terrible things that it's not appropriate for me to say from the pulpit with children around.

But, how could He just forgive the Ninevites like that? Without punishing the sins that they had already committed? You know, did He just sweep those sins under the carpet? Did He just forget about them?

Well, no. You see, when we see the rest of what the Bible says, we realize God could forgive them because He knew that His Son Jesus was going to come into the world centuries later and die on the cross and be punished on behalf of all who have truly repented, including the Ninevites.

And that's why they could experience God's mercy on this day. And that's why they could come back to God on this day and escape His judgment. And that's exactly the same reason why people today can as well, when they truly repent, they can find God's forgiveness because of what Jesus did.

And everybody in our community needs to know that. it's shocking that there are still people sitting right now watching TV in their homes in Plumston and they don't know, first of all, that God is coming and that they will face Him and second of all, that He has made a way for them to be forgiven.

[26 : 47] It's heinous that they don't know that yet. They must. And so that takes us back to my original question in conclusion. What needs to happen before we see that kind of revival in our community, people coming to God, people repenting of their sins?

Well, there's three things that are needed from this passage. Firstly, obedient messengers. Notice that? If Jonah hadn't have obeyed God eventually, Nineveh wouldn't have heard the warning and they wouldn't have repented and they wouldn't have been spared.

Someone needed to go and tell them. Someone needed to make the decision, no matter what it brought him, no matter how costly that was, to go and tell them. And it wasn't, you know, we often think that missionaries are people who are just, they're obviously good at that.

You know, they obviously like going and getting arrested and, you know, proclaiming the gospel at the risk of their own lives. They're that way wired. No, they don't. Sometimes they're just as reluctant as Jonah, but they obey.

Sometimes they're just as hesitant, just as scared as Jonah, but they obey. And also, they're willing, like Jonah, to tell people uncomfortable truths that they don't want to hear.

[28 : 04] Truths that God is coming and God is angry. Because if, if the Ninevites never heard that, if Jonah went there and said to the Ninevites, Ninevites, God has a wonderful plan for your life.

All you've got to do is put your hand up and say this prayer and then, and then, you know, wealth and health and riches will follow. No, he didn't tell them some stupid prosperity gospel, which is not the gospel at all.

He told them bad news. He told them that God was coming and God was angry. And in the same way, you know, revival in Plumstead and Cape Town will never happen if God's people aren't willing to stand up and be messengers of an uncomfortable truth, no matter how people respond to that. If we're not willing to talk about things like sin and judgment, people will never see their need to repent and they will never come to Jesus. People will only ever come to Jesus properly if they realize what trouble they're in with God and how much they need His blood to cover their sins. And someone needs to tell them that and it's not PC. People don't want to hear things about sin and judgment. But we can't keep quiet. Ask yourself, are you willing to do that with your friends, with your family members?

[29 : 22] Are you willing to warn your friends that God is coming and they're going to face Him one day? Or are you still a chapter 1 Jonah trying to run away from that responsibility and hide away and keep quiet?

You know, all of us are either a chapter 1 Jonah or a chapter 3 Jonah, which are you. Because you see, it's only when Christians are ready to say it like it is that God will send revival to our city, to our suburbs.

That's the first ingredient, obedient messengers. Secondly, genuine repentance. You see, the Ninevites didn't just believe the message and try to do better and, you know, resolve to read the Torah regularly and give some money to the poor.

No. Their repentance was total. It was life transforming. It was a recognition that there was nothing they could do to make up for their sins. It was an urgent, desperate call on God to have mercy. And it was a resolve to change. Have you repented like that? Have you repented like the Ninevites yet? Have you realized the eternal danger that you're in because of your sin?

[30 : 27] And have you resolved to change your life to make the costly changes that are necessary? Have you? Because without that kind of repentance, you'll never see revival in your own heart, let alone in the people around you.

That's the second ingredient, genuine repentance. And finally, the most important ingredient for revival is a merciful God. You know, you can have all the warning in the world.

You can have all the heartfelt repentance, but unless God makes a way to forgive sins, our city has no hope. And that's exactly what God did when he sent Jesus to die for the Ninevites, when he sent Jesus to die for Cape Town, when he sent Jesus to die for Plumstead, and all the people in here. that's what our city needs to hear about. Not just the reality of sin and judgment, but what Jesus did to take that judgment on himself.

And that's what you need to hear too. That's what you need to be reminded of, even if you're a Christian. Because there will be those times that you are overwhelmed with a sense of guilt and sin against God.

[31 : 36] When you feel unworthy of him, when you're drifting from him because you feel too guilty to come to him, that's when you need to remember Jonah chapter 2, that 3 rather, that's when you need to remember that God is a God of second chances.

See, he was a God of second chances for Jonah. He was a God of second chances for Nineveh. Because he's a God who wants to forgive people. He wants people to find mercy, so much so that he gave himself to save you from his own judgment.

Will you now, in response, give yourself to him and call others to do the same so that they will be saved from his judgment?

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your amazing word that through these accounts that we read, thousands of years old, you still speak to us.

that the words and the message of the prophet Jonah is just as applicable to our world today as it was back then. And Lord, help us to take it seriously. Help us to live our lives in light of your return.

[32 : 51] Help us, Lord, to repent, truly repent, not just to be sorry, but to change our lives, to please and to glorify you. Lord, I pray for anybody here this morning who has not yet done that.

Lord, I ask that you would lay it upon their hearts that they would not be able to ignore this warning that you've given us this morning. Help us each to respond to that, and Lord, help us to be bold so that we would warn others and that they would find salvation in Christ.

We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.