

"In Christ, Being His Witnesses Here And Beyond" (Our Family, Our Mission)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 October 2023

Preacher: Johan Linder

[0 : 00] So yeah, Pastor Johanna is speaking to us today and before he does, we'll just read Jonah chapter 3 together. So feel free to turn to that in your own Bibles.

So Jonah chapter 3. 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 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.

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, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

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.

[1 : 15] Do not let them eat or drink. 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.

Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. When God saw what they did and how they turned from the evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

That is the word of God. Let them give up their evil ways.

Hi everyone. It's good to be back here. I haven't been here for a while. Hopefully you still remember me. It's great to be back.

My wife actually reminded me that we have a celebration this week. We have been missionaries with OMF for 30 years.

[2 : 28] This week. Well, thank you. It is a milestone. When we left for Thailand 30 years ago, we had no idea what we were getting into.

And we never thought that we would actually still, 30 years later, be still part of the same organisation that we joined. So that's pretty amazing, really.

It's exceeded way beyond what we thought we were signing up for. And some of you might think, wow, that's wonderful.

You know, they've been trusting in God for 30 years. What a, you know, how wonderful is that? And it is wonderful. I mean, God has provided for us. You know, he's supplied everything that we need for ministry.

And he's really cared for our family. We've never lacked for anything. And it has been a great exercise for us to trust in God. But honestly, when I look back on 30 years of serving the Lord, many times I look back and I feel ashamed.

[3 : 39] I feel ashamed of some of the times that I've failed. I've failed God. I feel ashamed of the times when I've lost my patience with the people that I've worked with.

Sometimes the Thai people. Sometimes people from other nations who are part of our teams. And the conflicts that I've contributed to. As a leader, the conflicts that I haven't been successful in solving and bringing people together in love and unity.

The times that I've failed to understand the local culture and how things worked. Because I've been too pig-headed or haven't been able to really ask the right questions to understand how things work.

In this particular context. The times when I've been judgmental of other people. Judging very quickly. And saying, you know, they don't know what they're talking about. Or that person's weak. Or, you know, and not realizing the whole situation. Or understanding the situation that people are working in. The times when I didn't fully trust in God to fulfill his purposes. [4 : 47] Or being patient enough to wait. To see what God is going to do. Instead of trying to force my way of doing things. There are many things I would have done differently if I'd had a chance to do it all over again.

But, you know, thankfully God is a gracious God and he still works with us. In spite of our weaknesses and imperfections. And I've got to admit, when I look at Jonah. I feel like I scrub up reasonably well. Because Jonah was a terrible missionary. There's so many things wrong with Jonah. Now we love to tell this as a children's story. And that's all good. But what I'm going to do today is not going to, I'm not telling you a children's story. I'm telling you a story for adults. The way I think that Jonah should be looked at. He was rebellious. God gave him an explicit instruction. [5 : 57] And he ran the other way. He failed to do what God specifically told him to do. Now, I might have done many things wrong. And I might have been arrogant and pig-headed at times.

But I have not gone against God's explicit instruction. I've never done that. He was self-centred. He was very nationalistic and thought about the Jewish nation. And was very proud of his religious history and heritage. Even in chapter 2, when he's praying in the belly of the whale, do you see any repentance in his prayer? Have a look at chapter 2. I can't see any repentance there whatsoever. Thinking, God, I am so sorry that I have failed you. And I have rebelled against you. And I've gone my own way. He cries out to God to save him and to help him. But he doesn't admit that he's done wrong. And then in chapter 4, the last chapter, we're going to look at chapter 3. [7 : 02] So I'm skipping chapter 3 for the moment. Chapter 4, he's very judgmental. He looks down on the Ninevites. And he's very upset at God for being gracious and merciful and giving the Ninevites a turn.

Okay? So Jonah doesn't scrub up very well. And some preachers like to say, oh, Jonah learned his lesson. Because in chapter 3, God told him a second time to go and preach to the Ninevites. Well, we're going to look at what he's actually said in a minute. All right. Let's turn to chapter 3 that we're actually looking at. And so Jonah obeys. Credit to him. He goes to Nineveh and he preaches the word of God that God gives him to preach. And it's a very short message. Maybe it's because Jonah's grumpy. Just gives them a very short message. It says, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Now, you need to know, you need to understand this because this is really important to understand the book of Jonah. [8 : 10] Jonah, in chapter 3, verse 4, overthrown, the word that's translated overthrown can actually mean two different things. It can mean overthrown completely as in destroyed.

Or it can mean transformed. Okay. So it kind of has a double meaning. And Jonah would have known this when he was going through preaching. He would have thought. He was thinking to himself, oh, I hope the Ninevites are just destroyed. Overthrown. Completely obliterated. That's what he was hoping for. But what actually happened was that the Ninevites were transformed. And that is why Jonah was so upset in chapter 4. You see, because the people of Nineveh were noble. This is the huge contrast here. The people of Nineveh were noble. They genuinely feared God. [9 : 09] If you look at chapter 5, the king actually orders everybody to humble themselves. The Ninevites believed God.

A fast was proclaimed and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. So this was everyone. They worked together. And there was genuine repentance and turning away from evil. The king even ordered that the people and animals, herds or flocks, are not allowed to taste anything and do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. So even the animals repented. Now, how thorough is that? Okay, it wasn't just about people. It was about the animals as well.

They humbled themselves immediately as soon as they heard the message. And they cried out for mercy in verses 8 and 9. They say, But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth.

[10:20] Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.

Do you see the contrast here between Jonah and the people of Nineveh? The people of Nineveh were genuinely repentant. Now, if you look at the rest of the book, if you read chapter 1, here's the surprising thing.

Is that even the sailors who are considered to be the most sinful, immoral people in this world by most cultures, they were also the ones who repented.

But the Israelites were not in a good place. Now, there was a guy who wrote a prophecy about the same time as Jonah. His name was Amos. Have you read Amos?

Do you know about Amos? And Amos gives them a very hard time. One of my study Bibles says, Israel at the time was politically secure and spiritually smug.

[11:32] It was also a time of idolatry, extravagant indulgence in luxurious living, immorality, corruption of the courts, and oppression of the poor. Therefore, God would soon bring about the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom.

And so the Assyrians were a threat to Israel, but Israel was corrupt. Israel was smug. They were spiritually complacent and comfortable.

And this book, Jonah, was not written for the Assyrians. This book, Jonah, was written for the Israelites so that they would realise what was wrong with them.

So I'm going to read you some of the verses from Amos, who wrote at the same time that Jonah was alive. This is what he writes. He says, Hear this word. I always forget to click because I get so excited about what I'm saying.

There we go. I'll go back to that. Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria. I'll just leave that one.

[13:07] So Amos painted a picture of a corrupt nation that had its face toward God, but had turned their backs on a genuine faith.

And Amos doesn't hold back his words. And this is the people that Jonah came from. But the book of Jonah is really different to the book of Amos. It's written as a story. In fact, it contrasts Jonah's attitude to the people of Nineveh and also the sailors in chapter one.

In some ways, you could say that it's a satirical book because it paints the people that we normally think as the bad guys, as the good guys, and the people that we think are the good guys, like the prophets, as the bad guy.

So it's a satire. A little bit like this. Prince Harry releases new book, podcast, movie franchise, in a desperate bid for privacy.

Okay? Do you understand the satire? Okay? Okay? It's saying something in a kind of a funny way to bring out how ridiculous something is. And that was the point of Jonah.

[14:23] It's saying, look, you nation, you Israelites, you are so smug and spiritual. You look down on other people and look what happens to the other people.

They are the ones who repent. They are the ones who are turning to God. And you are not because you are arrogant and you are pig-headed. And you don't see what God is doing.

So here is a prophet who's acting contrary to God's character and purpose. He's rebellious, self-centred, and judgmental. He doesn't get what God is doing, just like the Israelites.

But the heathens do. First, the rough sailors in chapter 1. And now, in chapter 3, the Assyrians turn to God in humility and repentance. This is so opposite to Jonah and the Israelites who were playing their religious games and were pretending to do God's will and thought that they were better than everyone else.

Now, we don't know who wrote the book. We don't know who actually wrote the book of Jonah. Maybe it was Jonah himself who'd learned a lesson and wanted the Israelites and to warn the Israelite nation about becoming too inward-looking and smug about themselves.

[15:39] If that's the case, then Jonah really did learn his lesson. But we don't know if he actually did. Maybe he was saying, maybe Jonah was trying to say, look, God is bigger than your own little patch and is at work among all the people of the world, even those we might think of as our enemies.

And we need to get out of this attitude. We need to stop vilifying people who are different to us. And we can see how dangerous that is. We see it now in the conflict between the Israelites and the Palestinians.

We see it in the Ukraine, between the Ukrainians and the Russians, saying, oh, those people are evil. We've got to wipe them out. And that was the attitude that Jonah had.

And that is an attitude that's so dangerous. Often we tend to just be playing religious games when what God wants to see is a real repentance and us humbling ourselves before God in the way that the Ninevites did.

The funny thing is that even the most terrible preaching can bring about real repentance in the lives of people, just as it did with Jonah. It was a very short sermon, but it had tremendous impact and led to the transformation of the whole city.

[17:03] You know, sometimes we have our attitudes and we have our judgments. I remember one time in central Thailand, most of the churches that we had planted as OMF used to sing the Western doxology.

Do you know the Western doxology? Praise God to whom all blessings flow. I used this example in a Chinese church the other week, and they actually used this doxology at the end of their service. So it was kind of funny. Anyway, there's a Thai version. I'll finish there.

Anyway, so most of the Thai churches were always finished with this doxology. And I got on my hobby horse. I thought this was really wrong. I said, we're bringing our Western doxologies and our Western songs into the Thai church.

It isn't right. You know, it's wrong. We should try and change it and get them to sing other, sing some Thai doxology or something. Anyway, the next week we had a home group.

[18:16] We were starting up a new church and we had a group of people from the church come. And we were just sitting around our home group and we were just sharing, how did, you know, how did God speak to you? Like, when was the first time that you realised that God really loved you and accepted you?

And my friend Red, Dang in Thai, he said, well, for me, it was about two years ago when I drove down to Bangkok. I had to run an errand down to Bangkok.

We were living about three hours north of Bangkok. And he said, I just started playing this Christian song in my car. I wasn't a Christian yet, but I just wanted to hear these Christian songs. And this song came on the tape and it just really hit my heart.

And I just started singing this song over and over and over again. And all the way back from Bangkok, I just sang this song and I just felt for the first time how much God really loved me. And I just felt it right in my heart.

And I said, well, what was the song? And he said, well, it was, And so then I had to eat my words and say, okay, well, obviously God can even work through Western doxologies.

[19:27] And I had to kind of humble myself and realise that Western songs are not always bad. Because in the Thai church, you know, all the missionaries are trying to sing traditional Thai tunes and trying to bring them back into the church.

And the young people all want to sing Hillsong, translated into Thai. So, you know, we have to be careful about our judgments.

But, you know, sometimes we can have a judgmental attitude about people around us, people who are different to us. And we have to be very careful about that. Do we only share about God with people who are like us?

You know, if I'm looking around this room, most people come from Chinese heritage. That's great. Nothing wrong with that. But who do we share the gospel with?

Are we willing to step out of our comfort zone? Not just to talk about God with Chinese people, but there's lots of other people living in Auckland.

[20:36] Indians. Africans. Europeans. Maori. Do we shy away from people from different cultures and different countries?

Do we see other people from other backgrounds as too threatening or dangerous or unresponsive? Do we look down on them like Jonah did?

We've got to be careful about our attitude. I know there's been times when I've looked down on Thai people that I've worked with.

Some of their cultural ways are different to mine. And so I've been judgmental. And I've had to repent of that many times. You know, the biggest miracle in the book is not that Jonah was swallowed by the fish and survived for three days.

Makes a great children's story. But the biggest miracle is that Nineveh repented from their sins and their violence and turned to the one true God. And this is in spite of a grumpy, judgmental prophet like Jonah who did not have compassion on them at all.

[22 : 02] Who really wanted them to be destroyed and wiped out. And so if we want to look at someone who got it right, we need to look at someone who wasn't Jonah. The anti-Jonah.

And that is Jesus himself. He compared himself to Jonah in that he would also spend three days and nights in the earth, just as Jonah spent three days and nights in the whale, in the belly of the fish.

So Jesus understood the point of the book of Jonah. Let's go to, we'll read from Matthew chapter 12. I'm just going to read where Jesus actually points to Jonah.

From verse 39 he says, A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign. But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.

[23 : 13] For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. So the point?

Repent. These people were Jewish, religious people, set their hearts on following God, but still missed the point.

Jonah needed to repent of his rebellious, self-centered and judgmental attitude. The Pharisees needed to repent of their wickedness and their adultery.

And Jesus makes that clear. And you too need to repent of your wickedness and the way that you have rejected God in your own life. This is something that we all need to do, and we all need to keep doing it.

Now Jonah didn't need to point out what the Ninevites had done wrong. They knew what they had done wrong. They knew what their evil ways were, and that violence was a big part of it.

[24 : 18] Have a look at verse 8. Let everyone call urgently on God. This is what the king says. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

And so the king knew that the people had done lots of evil things. They were a violent and a brutal people.

And they were. They had a reputation for this. You probably have a really good idea of where you have rejected God and what you need to do to return to him.

Where you have been rebellious. Where you have been immoral. Where you have been complacent.

Where you have gone your own way and said, I want to do it this way. I don't want to do it God's way. There are hundreds of different ways, but you know which way you have gone.

[25 : 25] And this is really, really important. God is a God of mercy and compassion.

And we know this because of Jesus. Jesus compared himself to Noah and that he would spend three days among the dead, just like Jonah did. And he did that so he could be, redeem you by yourself, by you back for himself, as we've already heard.

From Mark Deaver. But in everything else, Jesus is so different to Jonah. He doesn't hate you like Jonah hated the Ninevites. Jesus has compassion on his people.

He loves you and he wants you to turn back to him, not because he wants to damage you, but because it's good for you.

Because he wants what is best for you. Because what is best for us is to walk with God, is to do the things that please him and to be in relationship with him.

[26 : 35] He doesn't want to judge you, but he wants to set you free from your own sins so that you can have a life that is free and full of joy.

It's the best way to live. And Jesus has made that possible. He's wiped away everything that stops you from coming to God. And all that remains is for you just to accept it and say, yes, thank you.

I'm now going to obey you. I'm going to follow you. I'm going to give you my whole heart. And just like Jonah, we've also been given the mandate of discipling all nations.

And there's still a lot to do. Most of the people groups that don't follow Jesus in the world today live in East Asia where RMF works.

So I just wanted to give you a bit of an overview of where those people are. Just to show you, Asia is home to the largest number of people, unreached people groups in the world.

[27 : 43] So you can see Africa there. There's been tremendous growth in the church in Africa. So many, many people have become Christians. And in Europe, yes, it's post-Christian largely, but there is still a decent Christian witness there.

And there is still some work to be done in reaching people. But you can see there that Asia is home to the largest number of groups of people who have their own distinct culture and language who don't know Jesus.

It's a tremendous amount of work. Huge needs. So Indonesia, for instance, Indonesia is a country with 275 million people.

We're talking large numbers here. How many people in New Zealand? Five million? Yeah. This is 275 million. That's a lot. That's a lot more than New Zealand.

And the population among the people who don't know Jesus is 192 million people. Most of those people are from either Muslim or Hindu backgrounds.

[28 : 53] You're talking masses of people and numbers there. Thailand. Thailand's been open to missionaries. We worked in Thailand for 14 years.

Over 70 million people, depends on how you count. But still a strong Buddhist country. Still there's more than 62 million people who don't know the love of Jesus.

Massive. Myanmar. A little bit less people, but still a population of 54 million people. 45 million of those are still unreached.

And most of those are the majority Bama people. So a lot of the tribal groups in Myanmar have actually become Christian through Baptist missionaries. Adoniram Judson was one of the first ones. And so there are over 2.3 million Baptists in Myanmar, but most of them come from tribal backgrounds. The Buddhist people who rule Myanmar are still largely unreached with the love of Jesus.

[29 : 56] Japan. Another one. 123 million people plus. And a very small percentage of Christians. And so we still have a large team in Japan who are reaching out.

They don't need medical work. It's not a poor country, but it's a spiritually bereft country where very few people know about the love of Jesus.

Cambodia is another one. About 16 million people. And there's still very few Christians there but have suffered a lot of trauma through the civil war that was there a few weeks ago.

So, you know, we're talking about, you know, reaching out beyond. You know, beyond this church. Going further than we've gone before.

So there's a lot to do here in New Zealand too with other groups of people. But what we're talking about is going out even further. And Asia is one of those areas in our world which needs workers, which needs full-time people to actually go and to share the love of the Lord Jesus with those people.

[31 : 04] With compassion. With love. Not with the attitude that Jonah had, you know, turn or burn. Or you will be destroyed.

But to go and to show genuine practical love and care. And to tell people, hey, did you know there's a God who loves you? Who cares for you? Who wants what is best for you?

Who can help you to live a life of transformation and victory in the Lord Jesus Christ? That's what people really need to hear. And there are all kinds of different ways that we can be involved in doing that.

In OMF we call it the six ways. So, you can go. We want people to go. Yes. That's great. We want the right people to go as well. To be a good fit for the placement and the job and the culture that you're going to.

That's really important. But we also need to send, be senders. So, for every person who goes, there's at least 30 to 60 people who are sending that person, who are providing finances and support and practical care and who are praying for that person in their ministry and keeping in touch with them.

[32 : 13] You can also welcome people who come here. I'm sure that you all know people who've arrived here. And when people arrive, they need a lot of help. And that's a tremendous ministry that

we can have, helping people to settle back here and then have the opportunity to show love and care for those people.

We can mobilise more people. And that's what we spend most of our time doing, is mobilising and just helping people to get on the journey to go overseas and to be reaching people.

And we can learn. There's all kinds of things that we can learn. Read books and biographies and books about strategy and what God is doing through different missionaries.

Mission is changing all the time. You know, there's not standing still. So, the way that we send missionaries 50 years ago is not the way that we're sending missionaries today. And so, learning and reading and being involved in that process is really important as well.

And then, of course, we need people who will pray, who will commit to praying. At the moment, we've started a Japan prayer network. So, we're trying to get people from all over New Zealand to be part of this network online who will pray for Japan.

[33 : 27] And we're hoping to start up other ones, for Thailand, for some of the other countries that we are working in as well. And for people to commit to pray and to see that God is raising up workers and that God is at work in the countries where we hope to see a large-scale turning to come to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, I want to invite you to think about how you can be involved in any of those ways. And if there is something that we can do to help you in any of those six ways, then we would also be really keen to talk to you and to talk about how you can be involved as well.

So, yeah. Thank you. Maybe I'll just finish with prayer in that. Father, we thank you so much for the story of Jonah. We thank you for what you are still doing in the world.

Father, that Jonah went out with a bad attitude, but we thank you that we have such a great example in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, Jonah really was upset when you had mercy on Nineveh, but Jesus cried over Jerusalem and wanted Jerusalem to turn back to God and to find the mercy and compassion that you want to have on people.

[34 : 49] Father, we pray that our hearts will be soft. And Father, we pray that our hearts will understand the grace and compassion that you have shown us in the Lord Jesus.

But also, Father, that you'll fill us with a certain determination to engage, to take the gospel of Jesus and to be witnesses here in our own communities, across cultural barriers, and also beyond that, Father, to the ends of the earth so that the love of Jesus can be proclaimed among those who've never heard it before, those who are trapped because they can't see you, they don't know you, and they don't know the freedom and the joy that comes when we follow you and we accept the forgiveness and the love that you have shown us in Christ.

We pray, Father, that you will wake us and use us and help us to be witnesses here and beyond, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.