

## Written Off

### Jonah 3:3-4:4 (NIV84)

<sup>3</sup> Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. <sup>4</sup> On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” <sup>5</sup> The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. <sup>6</sup> When the news 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. <sup>7</sup> Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. <sup>8</sup> But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” <sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. <sup>1</sup> But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. <sup>3</sup> Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>4</sup> But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”

The book of Jonah starts with God’s call to Jonah, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” (Jonah 1:2) Jonah’s response? He runs! He ran in the complete opposite direction of Nineveh, got into a boat and started sailing the other way. As far as the east is from the west, so far was Jonah running away from God and his call to preach against the great city of Nineveh.

If you were God, would you have written Jonah off after that? Would you have said, “Well, so much for that guy. Who else do we have? I hear good things about Amos.”? Not to make light of it, but there is good reason to write off Jonah as a loss. The man does not want to do this. He chose to run as far away from Nineveh as possible. Do you really want such a reluctant and insubordinate prophet to go and proclaim your message? You know he’s not going to give you his best efforts because you are going to have to force him to do this.

But God did not write off Jonah. Instead, he sent a great wind on the sea where his ship was sailing. Such a violent storm came up that it threatened to break up the ship. When the lot was cast to find out who was to blame for the storm, it fell to Jonah. The sailors found out that he is running from God. Unable to row the ship back to port and by the suggestion of Jonah himself, the sailors reluctantly tossed Jonah overboard. God sent a great big fish to swallow Jonah, and kept him alive inside the fish for three days and three nights. Jonah called to God to help him and have mercy on him. “The LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” (Jonah 2:10) “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.” (Jonah 3:1-3a)

Why was Nineveh so important to go to all that length to have Jonah go preach there? Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a heathen, violent nation that was poised to wreak havoc upon the Middle East. They were Israel’s enemies. Jonah had written the Assyrians off as enemies of God, enemies not worth saving, enemies that shouldn’t be saved unless you want Israel to be destroyed.

If Jonah could write the Assyrians off as enemies of Israel and of God, why didn’t God write them off as well? God tells us at the very end of the book of Jonah that “Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.” (Jonah 4:11) This is a Hebrew phrase meaning that there are 120,000 children learning right from wrong in the greater city area of Nineveh. This means there could be upwards of 500,000 people in this area. That’s a lot of people!

There’s another reason not to write off the people of Nineveh given in chapter 3 verse 3, but it’s a bit lost in translation: “Now Nineveh was a very important city.” The more literal translation of these verses says, “Nineveh was great to God.” It’s a Hebrew way of saying not just that it was a big city, but that all the people in Nineveh are important to God. Despite their wickedness and their violent ways, despite the fact that God would use them in less than a century to destroy the nation of Israel, God was not willing to write them off as losses. These were so many souls in Nineveh that need saving. This is why he commissioned Jonah. This is why he had Jonah go into the city preaching, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” (Jonah 3:4) God was not willing to write people off, no matter how wicked they are and no matter how many wrongs they have committed. God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth of what he has done for them.

“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” (Jonah 3:4) How effective of a message would you think that would be? What if we tried it around here? What if we joined those missionaries from Truth in Love Ministry going door to door with Jonah’s message: “Hey, guess what? You are going to hell in 40 days if you don’t change your ways.”? How many people would slam the door in our faces or look at you in bewilderment wondering what’s wrong with you? If you posted this on Facebook, how many people would unfriend you?

“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned” (Jonah 3:4) is a message of condemnation, a message of judgement. That message would never work today! How quickly we are to write off God’s pronouncement of judgment as if it would never lead people to repentance, that it would never lead people to change.

Why do we think that such a message would never work? Why do we write it off? Do we think that God’s Word when it’s proclaimed just as law has no effect on people’s hearts? Do we think that there must be more coaxing or sweetening of the deal before someone will come to believe in God? Is law preaching, those fire and brimstone sermons, just a relic of the past with no value for today? Does God’s law just turn people away and that’s why we write off proclaiming that message?

Yet, what happens when Jonah preaches this message of warning, telling people to turn away from their violent ways and ask God to forgive and relent from overturning them? “The Ninevites believed God.” (Jonah 3:5) They changed. They declared a fast. All of the people, the greatest and the least, the big guy to the little guy, the grandparents, parents, and children, they all put on sackcloth, an uncomfortable, itchy material that people used to wear to show that they are uncomfortable with their sin. The king himself got off his throne, put on sackcloth, and sat down in ashes. He even issued a decree that all people and their animals go on a fast and give up their evil ways and their violence to show God that they were moved by his Word to change their ways. Essentially, through Jonah’s preaching, the entire greater city area of Nineveh converts - the biggest mass conversion from unbelief to faith in God throughout the whole Bible. God’s law, that message of judgment, was the lead-in to change so many lives, making people aware of their sins, despairing of any idea of self-righteousness, and leading them to look to God to relent and turn his anger away from them.

I know I’ve told this story before to some of you, but it bears repeating. A young man was out going door to door inviting people to his church. He had had a rough day with people who were obviously home but not coming to their doors, people who shut the door in his face. Towards the end of the day, he came to one of the last houses that he was going to call upon. A man came to the door, but once he found out that this was a church invitation, he said something to the effect that he doesn’t need church, thank you, good-bye, and he started closing the door. The young man said, “Fine. Go to hell.” The man stopped and turned around to the young man, “What did you say to me?” The young man repeated himself, “I said that you can go to hell.” A conversation started, the man of that house actually came to church, and later on he joined that church. It all started with a young man telling him to go to hell.

Now, I’m not advocating that this should be our opening line with people who are not Christian, but we should not lose the application. When God’s law was preached to you, was it without effect? Was it a lost cause to point out your imperfection and your sin? No. God’s law, his judgment of your lifestyle, made you sit up and realize that something was wrong, made you ask, “How do I get right with God?” You may think that telling someone a message of judgment will never change them, but God proves otherwise. When we heard that judgment was coming, we had to find a shelter from that storm. We needed to be saved.

Jonah knew how people got right with God. It wasn’t by fasting and putting on sackcloth. It wasn’t by anything people did. It was because God is who he is. Jonah prayed, “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” (Jonah 4:2) God doesn’t write people off, but he does write off their debt of sin. Why? Because that’s the kind of God he is. Because he stepped in for us and paid the debt that we owed him, a debt of violence, a debt of wickedness. He knew that we could never repay that debt, and thus that we should be condemned. But God paid that debt for us. The LORD has had compassion on us. He does not bring on us the destruction that he threatened because he wrote off our debt of sin.

God never writes off people as losses. Instead, he writes off their sin so that they can be saved, just as the people of Nineveh were. That means that there is never a person that we meet who is written off by God. They may spend a lot of time away from him. They may be just as wicked as these Ninevites or as stubborn and angry and insubordinate as Jonah was. In fact, we ourselves recognize that we should have been written off by God as a loss at one time or another. But God’s Word – his law and his gospel – is never without effect. The Holy Spirit always does more with his Word than we could ever hope to accomplish.

God does not write anyone off as a loss. Instead he writes off our sin. May this message make us bold to proclaim his Word knowing that God will change many people from being written off as a loss to being found in God’s grace and compassion. Amen.