

My Friends in Our Lord Jesus Christ,

Suppose that I have discovered the cure for an incurable disease. Let's say it's something like pancreatic or lung cancer which is among the most difficult to cure cancers in our day. Now suppose I have the cure but won't share it. People all over the world are dying from this dreaded disease. In fact, it appears that the whole world has one of these cancers and all are dying—old, middle aged, Gen Z, Gen X, children and babies. Everyone is dying of it, except me, because I have the only available cure. But I won't share it because I don't care. In fact, I wish everyone would die!

That's what the story of Jonah is like. Everyone in Nineveh is dying because of their sin, but Jonah doesn't care. In fact, he wants them to die. Jonah wasn't the least bit interested in spreading the news of salvation, but that's precisely what God called him to do. It's what the NT calls us to do: God's people, filled with Spirit, go and share the gospel. We are sent out by our Lord Jesus as ambassadors with the good news of God's saving grace in Christ Jesus. We are blessed to share the love of Christ in our daily lives, both in how we live and in what we say.

So this morning I want to explore the call we have to share the gospel with the world, looking first at Jonah and Israel, and finally, at ourselves.

Jonah

Most, if not all of us know this story of Jonah so well we could tell it with our Bibles closed. God sends Jonah to Nineveh but he flees in the opposite direction for Tarshish on a ship. God sends a violent storm which tosses the boat back and forth until the sailors throw Jonah overboard. A big fish comes and swallows Jonah and after he spends three days in the stomach, God commands the fish to spit Jonah out—not too much worse for wear, and hopefully a little more willing to obey God. Jonah, then, obeys the Lord and goes—grudgingly, it seems—to preach to Nineveh, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed." Meanwhile he hopes they won't listen to him. But to his dismay the Ninevites repent and God spares them from the destruction he threatened to send. Now we arrive at our text with Jonah having completed the task God called him to do.

We might say, Mission accomplished, Jonah! You got the results that would please God. So, what's the problem? Why do you want to die? Why are you so upset with God? The people of Nineveh heeded your words. So, why are you so glum?

Looking a little closer at Jonah's behavior, we see a spoiled kid. He's a like a kid who doesn't want to share his toys with anyone else. He didn't get his way and now he has this extreme wish that he was dead. Why? Because Jonah hated his enemy, Assyria, and he was hoping God would destroy them. Jonah didn't share the Lord's concern for other nations. Jonah refused to acknowledge that God could love any but his elect nation. Jonah was selfish and unmerciful.

Jonah left Nineveh angry. He was mad at God. God was supposed to destroy that wicked city but he let those murderous people live just because they repented. So he went out to the east of the city, we read, and built himself a little shed to sit in and look at the city. He was hoping for a ring-side seat when God would drop fire and brimstone on Nineveh. His attitude stank!

But God works with Jonah. He gives him an illustration to get his attention. In his mercy, God provides a vine for Jonah to give him shade from the hot Mediterranean sun. One might wonder why God did that since Jonah seems to have already built himself a little shed or shelter. One can understand this passage to say that Jonah built the shelter with the quick growing plant that the Lord provided. It's pretty unlikely that he dragged some materials with him to that hill. He would have used what was around there and, due to the heat, not much more than branches would have been available. So a fast growing leafy plant from the Lord is a wonderful gift. Even if the plant grew after Jonah's shelter was built, it would have still been an additional level of shade from the heat. Either way, the tree would bless Jonah with more shade, an extra level of grace, you might say. God seeks to help Jonah understand the lavish love of God. Rather than getting angry with Jonah, God tries to show him why he is compassionate. God wants his children to have eyes of compassion, and hearts that bleed for a hurting world. He wants his people to love as he loves. Or as someone else said, "nothing touches a bad conscience more effectively than further undeserved kindness!"

After the leafy plant, which earlier translations identify as a vine, had sprouted, we read that Jonah was very happy. It provided him with cooling shade; in a very short time it brought him much joy. He loved that plant. But no sooner had it arrived and it was gone again. God appointed a worm and the worm came and attacked the plant which died overnight. Jonah had only one short day to enjoy the shade. Now it was gone. And, again, Jonah is angry with God for letting him down.

God comes to Jonah and reasons with him. "Do you have a right to be angry about the plant?"

"I do," Jonah said with a great deal of drama! "I'm angry enough to die." Or "I'm so angry I wish I was dead."

You can kind of hear God respond, "Angry enough to die! Well, that's a great answer, Jonah." Now Jonah knows how God feels. Are you angry enough to die for a plant that you didn't even make? A plant that you didn't even nurture? That vine sprouted in one day and was dead by the next morning. You only enjoyed it for a short time, and are you willing to die for it?

Jonah!! Try to see my side, says God. Can't you understand? I made the people of Nineveh. There are 120 000 precious people! Each created by my hand. Each created in my image. Each created for me to enjoy and love. I don't want them to die! But they are attacked too. Not by a worm, but by a serpent! Satan. The worm gnawed away at the vine and it withered and died. Sin gnaws away at the people of Nineveh every day; the devil wants them to wither and die so that I cannot enjoy them anymore. Let me tell you something, Jonah: I could die, Jonah! I could die! I will die, Jonah!!! I'm angry enough with

sin to die! The children I created are dying from sin gnawing away at them and I'm going to die for them. That little vine was nothing compared to all those people. That's what I want you to know, Jonah. That's what I want you to understand.

But Jonah didn't understand God. He didn't care about what God cared about. And sadly enough, he wasn't alone.

Israel

Jonah represents the whole nation of Israel in this story. Israel at the time of Jonah had it really good. They had almost everything they wanted—prosperity, political stability, freedom galore—not unlike what we have today. As mentioned when we looked at Jonah 1, Israel had just conquered many of their enemies, according to 2 Kings 14:25. Things were nearly as good as they had been in the days of King Solomon when the kingdom was united, prosperous and at peace. The young people didn't have a care in the world. The adults enjoyed their good life!

But after her triumphs over her foreign enemies, Israel began to gloat over her new-found power and prestige. She felt she was in God's good books for keeps. Israel believed that the 'day of the Lord' would come to punish other nations. She, however, was divinely elected and held a position of privilege, without any strings attached. She had nothing to fear and nothing to do.

That was not the case, however. At the same time that God sent Jonah to preach to Nineveh the capital city of Assyria, other prophets like Amos and Hosea were in Israel warning the people that they would face God's wrath too and become slaves of Assyria if they continued in their sin.

You see, it is true that God had adopted Israel as his own. He had made a covenant with them. But Israel failed to remember that, as God's chosen people, Israel represented God to the nations. When the foreign peoples look at God's covenant people, they are looking at a reflection of their God. That's why Moses told the people in Deut. 28:14

Dt 28:14 All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of Yahweh--God; and they shall fear you.

Friends, the world will stand in awe of God's people and therefore stand in awe of God if we live as God wants. But Israel wasn't doing that. As God's means of speaking to the nations around them, or representing God in the world, Israel failed miserably. The love of God was supposed to shine through them and touch every nation.

The sad reality is that the people of God were more concerned about standing in good stead with their neighbours and not being offensive to them. They had little concern for the Lord their God. They chased after the gods of their neighbours. They lived like their neighbours lived. Although they had the only cure to sin, they were in danger of succumbing to the same disease of sin that was plaguing their neighbours. They assumed, without reason, that everything was fine between them and God. Their complacent attitude about their religion threatened to blur the vision of the nations so that others could not find the way to God through his people, and would face eternal damnation. In the words of Jesus' parable and the kid's song we all know, "they hid their

light under a bushel basket". Israel's attitude was just like Jonah's: If the other nations die, they die. Big deal. Just as long as we are saved!

They cared only about themselves. That vine sprouted and gave shade, but when it died, depriving him of his comfort, Jonah got angry with God. There was more grief over a measly little vine that died than over the eternal damnation of 120,000 people. Shame on you, Jonah. Shame on Israel, too. Israel lacked compassion for the world. Not one tiny blood vessel in their national body bled for Nineveh, a city as full of sin as Sodom and Gomorrah before it; a city in which the people were so ignorant when it came to knowing God that they could "not tell their right hand from their left," as our text says. And Israel didn't want to let them know about the God's love. They wanted God all for themselves. How selfish. They just sat back expecting God's blessings to flow freely to them, just like that tree sprouted up and gave gracious shade to Jonah.

They failed to realize, however, that God had created the whole world and loves all people very much. God wants to extend his mercy to every man, women, and child, and even the animals facing destruction. So, God sends someone to show them the way to him. That someone was Jonah. And also Israel. Jonah was supposed to warn the Ninevites about God's coming judgement, in the hope that they would cry to God for forgiveness. Meanwhile the whole nation of Israel was supposed to stand as a bright monument for Nineveh, and all the other nations, to show that serving God makes a difference in the way one lives.

In the end, this is why Jesus came and paid for the sin of people from all nations. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world. That song says it well. God so loved the world that he sent his Son. Every person in the whole world can be saved because of Jesus' death and resurrection if he or she repents, just like Nineveh did.

The mercy that God extended to Nineveh is the same mercy he extended to Israel. But what did Israel do with it? They hogged it all for themselves because they failed to be amazed with the great salvation that God had given them and just took it for granted, even spurning it in many ways.

Us—The Church Today

Now the question facing us today, then, is "What do we do with that mercy?" If we know the love and mercy of God, will we also be merciful and share it? Or will we hoard it for ourselves? Are we really touched—touched to the point of action—knowing that Jesus Christ is all we need to be saved, and that he's the only way that the whole world can be saved?

Are we like Jonah? Do we hide the mercy of God from the world, or take it for granted? Do we see our neighbours living in darkness and hope that they go to hell, or do we think they'd never listen even if we did tell them about Jesus? Do our actions show that Jesus Christ is Lord of our life or are we so much like the world we live in that people can't see the difference? Do we proclaim—in deed as well as word—the love of Christ to our family, friends and neighbours so that they too may have an opportunity, as Nineveh did, to repent and be saved from the worm of sin that will gnaw away at their souls?

I sometimes fear that I am more like Israel than I care to admit. How about you? For many of us, God has been a daily part of our lives for as long as we can remember. Are we becoming too comfortable with God and his mercy? Has his grace ceased to affect our lives and become just a nice tradition? Do we live out of that grace each day, seeking to wholeheartedly honour God with our lives or are we more “of the world” than we should be so that the world can't see the difference and we don't care? In short, has our comfort in God's grace given us a heart of compassion for the dying world?

The message of Jonah to Nineveh is also intended as a message to each one here today. Dads and moms, have you been an example for your children? Does your life show the joy of your faith and the gratitude that you have in knowing that your sins are wiped away because of God's grace? Do you tell your kids about God's grace? Can they see that that your love for the Lord motivates your whole life? Do they see you show the love of Jesus to your neighbours?

Young people, you too need to strive to be lights to your non-Christian friends. Don't be apologizing for being a Christian. Don't apologize for having moral standards that you follow because you love Jesus. Don't apologize for having to say “no” to certain sinful activities you might be invited to engage in with your friends. Instead, let your friends know that your God was so angry with the effect of sin on the world that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for the sins of the whole world. Jesus Christ grieves when he sees your friends, or even yourself, looking to other gods than him for the answers to life's problems. He is the only answer we need.

That's why God reminds all of us through Jonah that we must share the love and mercy of God with the dying world. Let people know that we were once like the vine withering and dying in the heat, attacked by the worm. But Jesus Christ, the True Vine, was angry enough to die for us, and strong enough to conquer death when he arose. That's the good news. The Spirit will help us all to share it with our neighbours if we ask him and step forward in faith to live and speak the truth. He will give us love for them and the right words to say.

As a church, we must continue to proclaim the gospel without apology. We must live the gospel without compromise. We must love our neighbours, continuing to offer good things we are already doing—our programs like GEMS, Cadets and Community Corner. Our worship services each Sunday. Our Deacon's Christmas hampers and other avenues of love. We support missionaries and mission trips. But also in our daily work places, we must think of ways to be the salt and light of the world to our coworkers, bosses, customers and more. Similarly at school, our children and young people can be the loving presence of Christ to fellow classmates, helping each to feel the love of Jesus. The possibilities are many. Use your gifts and talents and time to show and share the love of Jesus.

The withering and dying world needs to know about Jesus. What a joyous task we have in this world! May our hearts be full of compassion for the who do not know the life that is ours—and can be theirs—in Jesus. We have the cure for the spiritual needs of our world. Let's happily share it!