

Jonah 3:3 – 4:4. ³Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. ⁴On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” ⁵The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶When 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. ⁷Then 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. ⁸But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” ¹⁰When 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. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ²He 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. ³Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”

God is patient.

- 1. God is patient with the unbeliever bringing them to faith and repentance.***
- 2. He is patient with the believer bringing us closer to his will through ongoing instruction.***

The three-year-old plops himself on the grass in a crying heap. “*But I don’t wanna!*” “*I don’t wanna come in. I don’t wanna take a bath. I don’t wanna go to bed.*” The child cries out with a litany of excuses. “*I just got out here.*” “*The sun is still out.*” “*The neighbors aren’t going inside yet.*” As a parent, it is a scene that tests and often breaks your patience. The scene may even get worse if the child gets up only to turn and run the exact opposite way that you wanted. Instead of going inside, the child defiantly runs back towards the playground or the swing set or the sandbox or just in any direction away from the house. In that moment a parent may have to resort to a slight bribe, or at least a distraction, as the parent promises the child something that would be pleasing, a special treat. The parent offers the child a bedtime snack or a pleasant activity which that child wants to do and suddenly that same child who was so grabs onto dad’s hand and he nearly skips into the house. It’s a bit astonishing how that contrast - between the child’s reaction to something the he or she wants to do and what the child does not want to do – that contrast is often so apparent in the life of a young child.

Are we like that child when it comes to following God? It may not be so apparent visibly in our lives, but often we can be similarly immature in our faith and in our obedience to God. Sure, when God tells us to do something that pleases us, something that we are very willing to do, we gladly follow. When he tells us to come worship we might have no problems doing that. When he tells us to pray and regard his word as holy we gladly follow along. But what about when God tells us to forgive that person who has harmed us? What happens when he tells us that we are doing something wrong and we need to stop and come back in, to live in line with his ways and dwell under his commands. What happens when he tells us it is time to get out of that sinful activity or habit and be cleansed and leave that sin behind? Do we listen and obey, willingly and immediately? Or do we ask for a few more minutes, a few more hours, a few more days, to indulge in this or that? Do we run the other way completely because we don't wanna do what God wants, but instead I wanna do what I want? What happens when God tells us that he wants us to reach out with the gospel to all people, even if that means He gives you opportunities to share that good news with the neighbor that irritates you or that relative you have never quite seen eye to eye with; what happens then?

This is the sort of scene that plays out with God and his prophet Jonah. And we rejoice in God that he was so patient. And out of the many things that this lesson teaches us we are going to focus this morning on the good news that God is patient. God is patient with the unbeliever bringing them to repentance through the power of his saving Word. He is patient with the believer bringing us closer to him through ongoing instruction.

The people of Nineveh had been running in the wrong direction for a long time. They were a notorious for being a violent and immoral and idolatrous people by reputation and by practice. Their kings often boasted in their brutality and cruelty. The prophet Nahum calls **Nineveh “the city of blood, full of lies” (Nahum 3:1)**. King Ashurnasipal was said to take great delight in the high mound of human heads that he erected after his victories. Assyria took great pride in her military victories and even her cruel nature, but her chief wickedness in God's eyes had to be her repulsive idolatry. The city had once been founded by a great-grandson of Noah, but had long since given herself over to the shameless worship of a number of false gods. The people of this great city were the hostile enemies of the Jews and had rejected the LORD for many years and yet God displayed his compassion and his patience for them. He would send a prophet to share the saving message with those that from a human standpoint appeared not worth saving. God was patient with the sinners of Nineveh and in his compassion and love he would send them his saving word.

God was patient with the people of Nineveh and he sent Jonah. Jonah is sometimes called the reluctant prophet, but perhaps that description isn't harsh enough. To say that he was childish and selfish, or outright defiant are more accurate descriptions of Jonah. He did not just hesitate to heed the Lord's call, but he ran the opposite way. He seemed to say with his words and actions, *I don't wanna go, because I don't like them*. Because when God caught up to him and sent him Jonah would later reveal his poor and selfish excuse for not wanting to go. When the people of Nineveh repented **Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.** ² **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. In many ways he acted like a child. He did want these people to have a blessing from his Father. Even when God showed remarkable patience and love and graciousness, this child of God, threw an immature fit because he didn't get what he wanted.

God was patient with the unbelieving people of Nineveh and he was patient with his prophet, the believer Jonah. Jonah would finally go and he would share the message of repentance to this great city filled with people. Jonah declared the Word of the LORD. ***“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”*** Regardless of whether this was the entire message or there was more detailed instruction and teaching, we are told that God's saving Word took hold of the hearts of these people completely. ⁵ ***The Ninevites believed God.*** The faith that God worked in these unbelieving people was so sudden and so thorough that it can only be described as a miracle of God. ***They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*** ⁶ ***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.*** From the greatest to the least of them, with complete devotion and repentance, these people were brought to faith in the true God and it showed. ⁷ ***Then he [the king] 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”*** And seeing the saving results of his powerful Word, God relented and had compassion on those who now completely belonged to him through faith. ¹⁰ ***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.***

The people of Nineveh believed in God and it showed. These wicked and rebellious people repented and this city founded by the great-grandson of Noah now was returned to the LORD with all her many inhabitants. A comparison is sometimes made with this account and the story of the prodigal son. These people with all their years of wasteful and sinful living had now by God's mercy had been forgiven and fully restored. It was a great and wonderful day when Nineveh was welcomed back by God, but Jonah much like that older brother in the story that Jesus would later tell, had a problem joining in the celebration. He couldn't see past the past rebellion of the Ninevites. He saw himself as the faithful son, but he wasn't acting in faith at this point in his life, was he? He was holding onto his hatred, rather than believing in God and trusting in his good and gracious will.

It is interesting to trace the highs and lows of Jonah's faith. God called him and he ran away from his LORD. When God tracked him down and caused a great storm to terrify those whom Jonah sailed with, Jonah confessed it was his fault and told his shipmates to throw him overboard. As he sank into the depth God rescued him and had him remain in the belly of a fish for three days. It is there where Jonah so beautifully confessed his faith and offered a

heartfelt prayer to God. He listened to God and went and proclaimed the message that he had been sent to proclaim. But even then Jonah did not follow God as the LORD wished. Jonah knew that the LORD was gracious and compassionate and yet he was cheering for God to go against his own nature. The grace and love that had made Jonah a child of God, the grace and love that spared him from death in the depths, that same undeserved love now was an irritation to him when it was extended to those he deemed undeserving.

Our life of faith is to be just that an entire life lived for God. Out of thankfulness for who our God is, out of reverence and respect for our compassionate Father who is the one true Almighty God and LORD we are to be all in as we follow him. But instead our love for God seems to be so much more conditional that it ought to be. If we were asked, "Do you believe in God?" our answer would not be, "It depends." And yet that is how we carry out our faith. When God does or offers something that we like, that we are in favor of, we gladly follow. But when His ways contradict with our ways so often we act like a selfish child as we continue to do what we want to do or we run the opposite way.

God, who had led an entire wicked city, to such an astounding turn-around, now worked patiently with his prophet. He would rebuke and instruct as long as he needed to, in much the same way he is patient with us. His patience and mercy, his compassion and love, extends to the unbeliever and makes remarkable change as his Word takes on it miraculous effects. But we also praise God that he is patient and compassionate with his defiant and selfish believers. His words of rebuke and careful instruction to us his believers continually bring us closer to God and his will. When that sinful defiance in us rears its ugly head the LORD is patient with his people. He forgives, he restores, he instructs, he helps us grow and mature in our faith so that we stop making excuses and instead follow our LORD more closely and fall in line with his will more often.

If someone to ask God if he loves us. I am certain that he would not say, "It depends." As much as we deserve that kind of answer, instead he loves us unconditionally. And that unconditional love led him to reach out to us who were rebellious and sinful from birth and who continue to be disobedient and stubborn as we live out our lives of faith. But his powerful Word shows us and speaks to us of His constant grace. The Savior who resolutely set his face towards Jerusalem, is resolute, and faithful even in the midst of our unfaithfulness. May the LORD ever bring his sons and daughters close to him, so that leading us through careful instruction, we may fall in line with his will more and more. As we live our whole life out thankfulness to our God we rejoice that he is patient. Jonah certainly got it right when he declared that God is ***a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.*** We rejoice in his patience and in his undeserved love for both believer and unbeliever. Thanks be to God. Amen.