

Jonah & Nahum:
The God Who is Merciful & the God Who is Wrathful

Good morning, I'm Josh Kohn. I live in Lindstrom, MN with my wife and two kids. Good to be here.

[Prayer]

The book of Jonah is an odd book in the canon of Scripture. It is only four short chapters of a seemingly random tale of a disobedient prophet from Gath-Hepher. To most, it is a fish tale. Surely, no man could survive three days and three nights in the belly of a fish, and so many people, even professing Christians, consider Jonah a parable, non-historical. But, Jesus seems to take a special interest in Jonah, and he seems to consider Jonah a historical figure.. In Matt. 12:40 he says that just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so the son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. And Jesus also says in Matthew 12 that Jonah preached to Nineveh, and they repented, and so because they repented they will rise up at the judgment *with the present generation* and condemn the Israelites who would not listen to his preaching. Jesus is not talking about fictional characters from a parable rising up with the real people he is speaking with. Jesus considers Jonah a historical account. So with that short apologetic in place, let's look at the text.

“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.” God tells Jonah to “arise” and go to Nineveh and call out against it. Jonah found this an unwelcome command, because Nineveh was Israel's sworn enemy. They were a savage people known to impale their enemies on poles, skin people alive, and worse. So Jonah, despite God's clear command to go to them, he *arises* but he

goes to flee to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. Now Tarshish is on the other side of the sea, pretty much the exact opposite direction from Nineveh. There is perhaps not a more blatant transgression in all the Bible. God says to do one thing, and Jonah immediately does the opposite. It is almost enough to make a person laugh.

Jonah brazenly sins by rebelling against God's direct command, and we immediately see the result of his sin. The NT tells us the wages of sin is death, and we see here in Jonah a poetic portrait of that same idea. God tells Jonah to arise, and Jonah arises, he gets up, but once he goes the wrong way, he begins a movement not upward but downward, down to the abyss. Look at the text. He went *down* to Joppa to get on a ship; he paid the fare and *went down* into it; then a storm comes on the ship and the mariners look for him but find that he had *gone down* into the inner part of the ship. Jonah's rebellion sends him down, down, down. He has exalted himself to rebel in arrogance against the clear command of God's word, and God is *bringing him down*. As the sea grows more tempestuous, they cast lots to see whose fault it is that this storm has come on them and threatens to break up the ship and drown them all. Here is another humorous part of the tale, where Jonah tells them he is fleeing from the presence of the LORD, and the LORD is the God who made the sea and the dry land.

Can you imagine the look on their faces? Are you out of your mind, Jonah? You're telling us *now* that the God you are fleeing from is the God who made the *sea*? And you ran away from him by getting into a boat? So they say in v. 10, "What is this that you have done?" So they try to figure out what to do with Jonah to get the sea to stop raging, and Jonah offers himself up as a sacrifice. He says, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." Now this is a point of

irony. Jonah says he fears the LORD who made the sea and the dry land, but there is no hint that he fears God at all. He sins deliberately, he falls asleep when God hurls a great wind on the sea because of him, then he shows no fear of being hurled into the raging sea. Meanwhile, the Gentile mariners are *afraid* of the storm in v. 5, calling out to their gods, fear exceedingly when Jonah tells them about the God he worships, who made the sea and the dry land, and when they hurl Jonah into the sea and it stops raging and the wind quiets down after this, they fear exceedingly again, and sacrifice to God. The pagans with almost no revelation show themselves more righteous and devout than Jonah. And they work hard to row to try to get back to land rather than throw Jonah overboard—they attempt to show him mercy. But Jonah? Why does he want to die so bad? Why is he so willing? Remember he is fleeing because God told him to go prophesy to bloodthirsty pagans who hate him. The reason Jonah is so eager to die seems to be that he would rather die than go tell people to repent.

We read this and we know what Jonah is doing is bad. That is wrong. That is backwards. A man of God ought to be different. But yet, how many times have you avoided telling someone to repent? We should be known for our love. We should gladly tell the truth to those who hate God; we should be willing to go preach wherever God calls us to go, out of gratitude and for the joy set before us.

“And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” So Jonah completes his downward descent, down into the fish’s belly. Some commentators have held the opinion here that God sent the fish to rescue Jonah in spite of his sin, but I will tell you, if I got thrown into the raging, dark ocean, waves rising and falling at the height of skyscrapers, sea mist spraying me in the eyes, wind ripping the

hair back on my head, swallowing water, gasping for breath, and then I started to go down into the depths, drowning, trying to hold my breath, looking for salvation, a great fish would not be the thing I was looking for. I would think things just went from bad to worse. The fish is no salvation. It is Jonah's tomb.

So, how does Jonah survive three days and three nights inside a great fish? He doesn't. I think Jonah is dead in there. And I think that's the whole point. If you look at v. 6. Jonah actually says, "I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever..." So, how does Jonah escape his watery grave?

The key to this text is to see that there are two prayers in chapter two. V. 1 says that after three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, Jonah prays. And in that prayer *after* three days and nights, he talks about a *previous* prayer he prayed, as he sank into the depths. V. 2 "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice." Notice, those verbs are past tense. Jonah is praying in the belly of the fish after three days and nights, and he is saying that God *already* answered him, that he *already* had cried out, and the LORD heard him. This is all past tense. Waves and billows passed over him, the waters closed in to take his life, weeds wrapped around his head in the churning waters. He went down to the land whose bars closed upon him forever. And in v. 6 "*yet you brought up my life from the pit...*" When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple." All past tense. As Jonah was swept into the heart of the sea, and as his life was fainting away, he remembered God, and he prayed, and God heard, and I think that *after* three days and three nights God brought up his life from the pit. *He resuscitated* OR resurrected Jonah. If I'm right, this is the only text in the OT where a man is raised from the dead

totally without a mediator, without anyone else coming on God's behalf and raising him. Jonah rises from the dead in this fish tomb, without a human mediator, just like Christ did on that third day in his own tomb, and he prays this prayer of thanksgiving, because if God has delivered him from Sheol, and raised him up, surely God can rescue him from the jaws of the fish, just like Jesus when he rose from the tomb, wasn't concerned about how the stone might get rolled away.

And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. And God calls to Jonah a second time and tells him to preach to Nineveh, and this time Jonah goes. And all Jonah says is, "Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." And the whole city repents. Bloodthirsty pagans hear a few words and they sit in ashes, from the least of them to the most pompous king in the city. Again, this is irony. Israel has all the Scriptures and all the prophets, scroll upon scroll upon scroll, and they still go astray, they still won't repent. But these pagans hear a few words and humble themselves to the dust. Church, don't be like Israel. We have a whole Bible. We have greater revelation. Don't let your hearts be hardened. If you are living in sin, repent today.

Moving on to the end of chapter 3, when God sees how they have humbled themselves and repented, he relents and does not do it. And here is where we get the clearest window into Jonah's motives and thoughts in this book. When God relents, Jonah is angry. He says, this is why I went to Tarshish, because I knew if I went to Nineveh, you would have mercy on them. He cannot stand the fact that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. He can't take it. In ch 4 v. 3 three he actually *begs* God to kill him. Jonah would rather die than see his enemies the Ninevites live. Jonah is so angry that God

would have mercy on this enemy, and now this theme of anger comes into the forefront and is extremely important in the last chapter.

Ch 4 v. 1 says Jonah is angry, in v. 4 God asks Jonah if he does well to be angry, then God grants Jonah a plant to shade him and give him comfort, and Jonah is glad because of the plant, but God withers it with a worm and then scorches Jonah with heat. Again, Jonah asks that he could die, and he is even more angry. Look at v. 9, God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” Jonah is very attached to the plant. He loves it, and it’s gone. V. 10 And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And shouldn’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” God is saying you pity the plant? Good. That plant was a good thing. But if it’s good that you pity the plant, which you had zero invested in, then how much more should I pity Nineveh?

And if you’re angry over a plant perishing, how much angrier should I be if Nineveh should come to perish? God has much more reason to be angry than Jonah. And this rhetorical question here at the end of the book is not the end of the book. No. This is a very pregnant rhetorical question, because if we answer the question according to the way Jonah answered, and if God makes the case that he is justified to be much more angry than Jonah, and if Jonah is angry enough to die, then we must answer this hanging question at the end of the book by saying: Yes, God ought to pity Nineveh. But more than that! If God pities Nineveh like Jonah pities the plant but moreso, then like Jonah, he should be angry over the state of Nineveh—yes, *even angry enough to die!* [pause] If Jonah’s pity for the plant caused him to be angry enough to

die, then we ought to conclude here in answer to this question that *God is angry enough to die for Nineveh*. This obliterates every pagan conception of deity. A God angry enough to die for men? Can a God die? And this side of the cross we know that Jonah is foretelling the death of God the Son on behalf of Gentiles in the death of Jesus Christ. Hundreds of years before the crucifixion.

And this is where we see God as holy and completely other than us, because Jonah, and we like him, so often in our sinful nature, we would rather die than go preach the gospel to someone and save them; but God would rather die than see Nineveh perish without the possibility of repentance.

So God is astoundingly merciful. But Nahum is the sequel to this story about Nineveh. While Jonah focuses on God's mercy, Nahum focuses on God's wrath. God's wrath is not a popular topic. Years ago, Rob Bell wanted to erase hell, and a lot of others want to do the same. But we worship the God who revealed himself in nature and in Scripture. And this whole book of Nahum centers on God's attribute of jealous wrath. And what may be even more strange to you is that this book is offered as comfort. That's what Nahum means—comfort—and God offers the judgment of Nineveh as comfort for his people. So while God chastises Jonah for caring more about a plant than about the Ninevites, and being angry that God would be merciful toward them, now God comforts his people with an oracle saying he will wipe Nineveh off the face of the earth. Is this a contradiction? Let's look at Nahum and sort it out.

Starting with v. 2 of Ch 1. "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear

the guilty.” You may have noticed at this point in your travels in the book of the Twelve that the authors keep bringing up Exodus 34:6 and the name God proclaims to Moses as he passes by him while he hides in the cleft of the rock. Jonah focuses on God’s attribute of mercy, and demonstrates the depths of God’s love for man made in his image, but Nahum focuses on God’s hatred for wicked men created in his image. Jonah demonstrates God is angry enough to die for sinful men, and Nahum tells us that God is angry enough to destroy sinful men. God is hot in his anger, and the heat is not like the flame of a bic lighter; it is no sparkler or glow worm; and it certainly is not a strike a light match or a yule log. This is a fire tornado; this is a California wildfire; this is the Yellowstone Caldera ready to burst. God is going scorched earth here.

“He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him.” (Nah. 1)

This book is not for the faint of heart. And that’s just the first chapter. In chapter 2 Nahum writes of God sending his army against Nineveh. The chariots come with flashing metal and brandish their spears; the chariots race madly; a mistress is stripped and carried away, and the slave girls lament; Nineveh is poured out like water and plundered. And in v. 13 of chapter two, God says, “Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions.” Is this the same city of Nineveh from Jonah?

Chapter 3 goes on and pronounces woes on the city. “Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder—no end to the prey! The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies! And all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whoring, and peoples with her charms.”

There are a lot of good words to describe God, but this passage shows that “nice” is not one of those words. God is anything but nice. He is gracious, and loving and kind, but he is not nice. He is patient, but his patience does not last forever. Look at v. 5 to 7. “Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. And all who look at you will shrink from you and say, “Wasted is Nineveh; who will grieve for her?” Where shall I seek comforters for you?” This is not nice, but it is what righteousness and love looks like for God in this situation. God does no wrong. And if the Bible is true, then this is the God with whom we must do. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “He is not a tame lion.”

Now, in our day most people would not see a God who does this to his enemies as loving; this is not what love looks like, if you ask Disney, or Netflix, or Governor Tim Walz. But our Bible was written by one God, and that same Bible makes a more bold claim than to say that God is loving; no, it says that God *is* love. So if you see God do something, and you think it’s unloving, you’re either ignorant or corrupt. And the Bible says in Romans 1 you have no excuse for your ignorance. God is patient and loving and kind and he is ready to make **total war** against

every depraved wretch who refuses to repent and continues to flout his righteous law. Though he may tarry now, make no mistake, he is coming, and he will come, and he will make all things right.

See, God's wrath is not opposed to his mercy, and his mercy is not opposed to his wrath. Both are the revelation of God's love as it meets a created, sinful world. God is love, and because he is love, he must be wrathful. He must get angry at sin. He must punish evil. Ultimately, he must punish evil because God is himself, and he loves himself, and he will not give his glory to another. So God will put Nineveh to an end; all her merchants and princes and scribes will be cut off and be found no more. God will scatter the people of Nineveh on the mountains. And the book closes with these words: "There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?"

Nineveh's doom has come. And all who hear the news celebrate. They clap their hands. And Why? Because in answer to the rhetorical question, Nineveh's unceasing evil has come upon everyone. Everyone has endured Nineveh's oppression, lies, deceit, and violence. Everyone has been afflicted by this prostitute Nineveh, and now God, as he said in ch. 1 v. 13 "I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart." Nineveh has oppressed and terrorized and enticed other nations to do evil. As this book says, she has acted like a prostitute in leading men astray, all to enrich herself. When the peoples clap over her demise, are they wrong? Nahum means comfort, and the people at the end of the book of Nahum find comfort and clap their hands at Nineveh's demise. It is okay to want good, hard justice. It is wrong to take vengeance for oneself, but it is good to seek and to do justice, and justice is getting what you deserve. It is

not getting what you need, or what you want. It is getting what you deserve. And when people sin, they deserve death. Every time. And that is the problem with this book of Nahum. Nobody wants to admit that they deserve this wrath that God is pouring out, and so men suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Surely other people are bad, but I am different. I do some good things. I've never impaled anybody on a pole. Look, God, there's people a lot worse than me. Sure, I've lied a few times, I've deceived people, and I've lusted after women in my heart, and I've dishonored my parents here and there, but I'm basically good. But that's not what the Bible says, so it's your word against God's and since by your own admission you're a liar, I'm going to take his word over yours. The Bible says there is no one righteous, no, not one. And I think this book of Nahum says the same. Again, this rhetorical question at the end of the book seems pregnant with meaning. "Upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?"

Who has avoided Nineveh's evil? The implied answer is *no one*. Now, at first you might think Nahum is just talking about Nineveh's oppression and conquest. But Nahum says more than that. In chapter 3, the context closest to this rhetorical question, Nahum calls Nineveh a bloody city, all full of lies and plunder, and he notes in v. 4 that Nineveh's judgment has come for her whorings, as she was graceful and of deadly charms, and betrayed nations with her whorings, and peoples with her charms. So part of the evil that has come upon the nations, that has come upon all men—if there is no one on whom this unceasing evil has not come—is Nineveh's adulterous lies and charms, by which she betrayed nations of men and made them partakers in her guilt. Nineveh enticed everyone to sin! She lured them away from God with her deadly charms and graceful lies. She was adulterous and she made all mankind the same. And if it is all mankind that would include you. And if justice demands that you die for your sin, then there is

no hope for you or for any other man on this earth. Her evil has come upon all men. That is the answer to the question. If this is true, there is no hope. The wages of sin is death. We're all Ninevites living in the city of destruction. There's no good news.

But there is even more to this rhetorical question. Nineveh's unceasing evil, including temptations to sin, have come on all people under heaven, but her temptations have not come upon God. If they had come on God, he could not be judging Nineveh. And God says in ch. 1 of Nineveh, "I will break his yoke from off you and will burst his bonds apart." So while every man under heaven has been captivated by the sway of the harlot Nineveh, there is yet one above the heavens who has not. There is yet one who is holy and righteous and blameless. And now look at ch. 1 v. 15. "Behold upon the mountains the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace!" There is good news in the book of Nahum! There is someone, a singular man, whose feet bring good news and publish peace! But stick with me here. If all men under heaven have sinned with Nineveh, how can there be any man, with feet, publishing peace? Whose feet are bringing good news? If God is the only one who is without sin, then how is there good news to publish? How can any mortal man even take God's name on his lips to speak good news? We're moving quickly here, but there is a parallel passage in Isaiah 52:7, using the same language. And the LORD speaks before the mention of this messenger who speaks good news and publishes peace, and he says, "in that day they shall know that it is *I* who speak; *here I am*." There is your God-man. There is the man who can speak peace and publish good news. There is the man who can speak God's name on his lips and bring a message of peace and not die. Many messengers bring the good news, but they could not if that one man Christ Jesus did not come and speak that good news first and accomplish redemption. And Jesus, the man did not come from under heaven, but

he came down from heaven, and he is the one who first heralded the dawning of the kingdom, and he's the one man on whom Nineveh's temptations were not effective.

And though Jesus had not sinned, he took on the wooden yoke of Nineveh in the cross of calvary, and he dragged that yoke of sin and death and oppression and lies up that hill, and he was crucified at the hands of sinful, deceived men, who believed lies and did the harlot's bidding, so that you, even though you were deceived like them, could have eternal life. So that God can be both wrathful and merciful, so that he can be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Christ. Because the judgment that Nahum describes falling on Nineveh, in order to save some out of Nineveh, Christ had to take that judgment on himself. So that hot anger that makes Bashan and Carmel wither, and withers the bloom of Lebanon; that hot anger and wrath that made mountains quake and hills melt in chapter one, that overflowing flood of God's anger; and that army that God sends against Nineveh and makes her desolate and strips her of all her clothes in Ch. 2; Christ is stripped naked on the cross and soldiers divided his garments, and he hung there in shame and endured the contempt of all the nations, filth was thrown at him, and he was made a spectacle and a byword, so that God could pardon your sin, that unceasing evil of Nineveh that you participated in, for Christ's sake. So God is true to his name when he is merciful in Jonah, and he is true to his name when he is wrathful and merciful in Nahum. He will by no means clear the guilty. But those who believe in Christ are not guilty. Those who believe in Christ are justified—*declared righteous*—in him, and there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

If you believe in Christ, because he took the punishment you deserve, you will not come under the condemnation of that Nineveh God destroys in Nahum, but you will enjoy the mercy

that God shows toward that Nineveh God spares in Jonah. If you believe, you are justified, and if you're justified, you will certainly be glorified. Your justification and the surety of your glorification do not depend one lick on your own good works. They depend on Christ's blood and his righteousness alone, and their imputation to your account by faith alone. When you believe in Christ, it is finished. It is accomplished. You are free. There is no fear of condemnation. Only faith working through love. And if you sin ten times in a day or 70 times 7 times, it does not change the fact that you are righteous in God's eyes, you who are in Christ by faith. So repent. Believe in him. And you will be saved.

[Prayer]