

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever noticed how hard it is to forget the past? Especially when it comes to sin, our memory becomes near photographic. Whether it's a sin you've committed, or whether someone hurt you, you remember that. Today in the sermon, we want to talk about that first category: sins you've committed. What would make the top of your list of past sins, faults, failures and indiscretions? What have you done in your life that you are most ashamed of? I'm just going to pick three people at random, and I'd like you stand up and share with everyone the worst moral failing of your life. [Pause.] Okay, I'm not really going to do that because no one would come back to church next week. But your heart jumped up into your throat for a second there, didn't it? There's something from your past that you would just *die* if it was announced before the church today, isn't there?

So the big question we want to answer today is this: **How do you get past your past?** Haven't you noticed your past sins and failings seem to have a way of creeping into your present? Even if you have never repeated it, the guilt can cripple you. And those old sins creeping into the present can destroy your confidence and your peace. But often times the sins don't remain in the past. They come into your present again and again. You fall back into them over and over. How do you escape the cycle? How do you leave that pet sin permanently in the past?

I want to give you hope today: This is the idea we're unfolding. How can you get past your past and enjoy a present where you know you're forgiven, unburdened, full of peace and joy? How can you get past your past and look forward to a future with hope and confidence? We will discover today that "God's Word gets you past your past."

The text before us today is Jonah 3:1-10. If you haven't already guessed, I'd like ask you to read through the book of Jonah a couple times this week. We would be hard-pressed to find a better text to teach us how to get past our past. The two major players in this text are Jonah and the people of Nineveh. Both had a past to get past. Let's talk about the people of Nineveh first.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire. The people of Nineveh were very wicked. God decided he would tolerate it no longer. The book of Jonah doesn't give any details about the nature of their wickedness, but we know a few details from the book of Nahum and from non-Biblical sources. The Assyrians became so powerful because they were terrorists. When they fought and conquered other lands, let's just say they didn't follow the rules of the Geneva Convention. They were a proud and cruel people. The army was notorious for its brutality and they did all they could to make sure their reputation preceded them. Assyrian carvings from that era depict captives skinned alive, stabbed, beheaded, impaled on poles, their hands or feet or tongues chopped off, and their eyes put out. Those spared from the torture were deported from their home land and transplanted to other parts of the Assyrian empire where they would be less likely to form an organized revolt.

For their arrogance, violence and oppression of others, God was not happy and intended to destroy them. But if they could somehow get past their past, God would spare them. But really, what chance would there be of that? How could an entire great, pagan, violence-loving city get past their past? Hold that thought as we now turn our attention to Jonah.

Jonah: This is an interesting contrast, because compared to the wicked people of Nineveh, how bad could Jonah be? How much past could Jonah really have that he would need to get past? He was a prophet of God, living among the people of God. We actually know very little of Jonah. He gets a brief mention in 2 Kings 14... which helps us figure out when Jonah was a prophet. It was approximately 760BC, which means there were still two kingdoms in Israel. Jonah would have known the Assyrians as a growing world power in the east that was becoming and increasing threat to Israel's existence. Surely he knew something of their reputation. He knew they were a pagan nation that didn't know or worship the true God.

And then God spoke to Jonah. He told Jonah: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." This was not what Jonah wanted to hear. There may have been some concern for his own well-being. Maybe some thoughts went through his head of what it would feel like to have eyes put out, or hands chopped off. But his reluctance went well beyond his concern for his personal safety. He just plain did not want what God wanted. God wanted them to repent and be saved. Jonah wanted them to perish under the strong hand of God's judgment.

Being a prophet of God had a pretty simple job description. God speaks to you. You speak to the people whatever God spoke to you. So God spoke to Jonah a simple message to speak to the people of Nineveh, and Jonah did the unthinkable. He ran. Actually, he floated. He booked the first ship going in the opposite direction to try to get as far away from Nineveh (and obeying God) as he possibly could.

This was Jonah's ugly past that he would need to get past if he was to have a right relationship with God again.

Before we look at God's solution... what is your past that you need to get past? What sins of the past still weigh heavy on your conscience? It may be something that happened relatively recently. It could be something that happened many years ago. What from your past stand between you and your God? Sexual sins? (Indiscretions from your young adult years? Use of pornography? Sex outside of marriage? Cheating on your spouse?) Theft or fraud? Divorce? Cheating? A relationship in which you caused someone great pain, be it physical or emotional? Have you struggled with arrogance tending to look down on most others? A lifetime of neglect of God's Word, and things spiritual and eternal? More than one of the things I just listed? Something else besides what I just listed?

These aren't small matters, are they? Most of the time we find ways to not think about our past. We distract ourselves in the present so it doesn't come to mind. But here's the thing: if we don't truly get past our past, our past sooner or later always shows up in our present, and will most certainly negatively impact our future. How do we get past our past?

Let's find the answer in God's Word in Jonah 3:1-10:

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.

If the book of Jonah started here, you'd think Jonah was this great, obedient prophet. God spoke, he went. But there's this little phrase, "a second time" that tells us something came before. When the Word of the Lord came to Jonah the first time, he refused to obey God. He ran from God. He took a boat in the opposite direction. God caused a storm which ultimately led to him being cast overboard. As he sank to the bottom of the sea, a large fish swallowed him up, sparing his life.

Funny how three days of quiet time in the belly of fish gives you a new perspective on life. The fish spat him out on dry ground.

Then the word of the Lord came to him a second time. Have you ever stopped and thought about how truly amazing that is? If you were God, would you have spoken to Jonah again? Wouldn't you have found another prophet. A better prophet? A more obedient prophet? If you were God, instead of sending a large fish to swallow and save Jonah, wouldn't you have sent a shark to finish him off?

And here's where we learn something important about our God when it comes to our past. God is patient. God loves us. God will persistently work to find a way to bring us back to him. God forgave Jonah, and actually even allowed him to continue to be his prophet. How many earthly employers do you know that are so patient with their employees? If someone refuses to do what the boss says, and in fact does whatever possible to make obedience impossible... that person will no longer be an employee. You don't get a second chance when your insubordination and obstinance reach that level.

But our God is a God of amazing patience, love and second chances. The Word of the Lord changed the heart of Jonah. And we see the nature of our God just as clearly in the way he dealt with the wicked people of Nineveh, as we see the word of the Lord change them too.

Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 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. 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. 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. 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 their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

The impossible happened. The arrogant, violent people recognized their sin and guilt. They repented and turned to God for his mercy. All the people did this. And most incredibly... even the king repented! He ordered fasting and mourning for the whole city. Even the animals would not eat! All would wear sackcloth and ashes. He called everyone to pray to God to ask for his compassion and forgiveness.

And then the second impossible thing happened: God relented. He had compassion and he did not destroy the city as he had threatened.

How did the people of Nineveh get past their past? As different as they were from Jonah... as different as their circumstances and background, the way to get past their past was exactly the same. They listened to the Word of the Lord. They learned of the severity and consequences of their arrogance, violence and sin. They repented of their sin, having genuine sorrow over their past. They turned their lives over to a compassionate and gracious God, hoping that he would have mercy and forgive them. He did.

For both Jonah and the people of Nineveh, the way to get past their sinful, guilty past, was the Word of the Lord. Friends, what worked for Jonah and what worked for the people of Nineveh will work for you as well. How do you get past your past. How do you get past the failure, the guilt, the mistakes, the wrong paths? How do you get past the damage you've done in your relationship

to God (and others)? How do you keep the past from creeping into your present? How do you keep your past from negatively impacting your future?

- 1) Listen to the Word of the Lord the first time. The Word of the Lord changed Jonah. It changed the Ninevites. It absolutely can change you too. Both of them heard the word of the Lord twice. The first time they heard the word of the Lord wasn't exactly a pleasant thing. God confronted them with their sin. When I say, "Listen" I mean truly listen with all your attention. Take it to heart. Take very seriously to heart what God says to you about your sins and rebellion. He hates it. He won't tolerate it. He threatens you with destruction... not just in this life but in eternity.
- 2) So repent of your past sins. Not just in general, but specifically. What did you do in the past that keeps creeping into your present and threatens your future? With a genuine, godly sorrow, present your specific sin to God. And let me be honest. A genuine repentance will usually require confession to a person. Most of our grievous sins have hurt others. If you are truly sorry for your sin, won't you also talk to the person you hurt and ask for their forgiveness as well? In addition, there is often the need to confess your sin to another believer. Whether you confess to me, your pastor, or to another member of the church whom you trust, this guilt you carry is such that it's not good to handle this by simply confessing it to God. It needs to truly get out. Confess to someone.
- 3) Where there is genuine sorrow over sin, we hear the word of the Lord a second time. Jonah heard God's Word a second time and heard that he was still a prophet of God. He had been forgiven. The Ninevites heard the Word of the Lord a second time that they were forgiven and they would not be destroyed. Friends, God speaks to you a second time as well and tells you that you are forgiven. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12) For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Hebrews 8:12) The reason he forgives you is found in his Son, Jesus Christ. Read the Gospels and you'll find that Jesus had no past to get past. Jesus was perfect... always. But because of our past, he went to the cross and made our past his past. God held his Son accountable for our sin. He suffered. He died. He took care of our past (and our present, and our future!) Hear the second word of the Lord speaking to you: For the sake of God's own Son, Jesus Christ, you are declared to be blameless in his sight.

Friends, whatever is in your past does not have to ruin your present or destroy your future. The Word of God changes us. By God's grace, with genuine repentance, with God's mercy, compassion and forgiveness, you can truly get past your past to live in freedom, peace and joy in the present, with a sure hope as you look to the future. God's Word gets you past your past! Amen.