**Receive the Word**

Jonah 3

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Hebrews 4:12

[SWORD] Now this is a single-edged sword and a decorative one at that, which means it’s dull. But use your imagination and think of me as ***Aragorn with Anduril***, the flame of the west, or ***William Wallace*** with his enormous 2-edged sword in Braveheart. That is how the Biblical writers describe the Word of God.

Unlike this ***lifeless*** blade that requires someone with far more skill than I possess, the Bible is living and active in its own right. Unlike this ***dull*** blade, Scripture is as sharp as a razor blade - so sharp it can divide soul and spirit. That’s a Bible joke of sorts - as the terms ***soul and spirit*** are used interchangeably. I’m not sure what the terms ***“joints and marrow***” refer to Biblically or biologically, but I deduce that it is a similar play on words for things that are difficult to separate. And what is more difficult to separate than the ***thoughts and intentions*** of the heart?

**God’s Word is powerful**. It slices through doubts and objections. It exposes the heart. It moves the spirit. It shapes the mind. It changes us. If the Bible writers had known about light sabers I am confident they would have said things like, ***“And take up the light saber of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”*** Valid modern translation. I’m standing by it.

What makes Scripture powerful is that it is God’s Word - it is God Himself speaking to you and me. I’m not sure there is a passage in the Bible that better illustrates the power of God’s Word than Jonah 3. **Look at the impact of Jonah’s 8-word sermon:**

* An entire city of 120,000 people - from the least to the greatest, immediately repented.
* Even the king of Nineveh himself took off his royal robe, replacing it with sackcloth.
* And the king decreed a city-wide time of fasting, worship and prayer!

***8 words.*** “Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

If there was ever any thought that it was the eloquence of a preacher that changes lives - let this passage disprove that once and for all. Clever story-telling and a good sense of humor can win some positive google reviews and maybe a like or two on YouTube but that is not where the real power is to change lives. ***Lives are changed when the Word of God falls like a seed into the fertile soil of a humble heart.***

We can go even further than that! It is the Word of God that **breaks up the resistance and pride** of a stubborn heart, making a person humble and ready to repent and believe.

We have **two simple applications** for today: ***receive God’s Word and share it***. That’s it. If we do those two simple things we will change as we receive God’s Word, and we will become agents of change as we share God’s Word with others. First, receive God’s Word.

1. **Receive** God’s Word

“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.” Jonah 3:1

The message was exactly the same the first and second time around: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and call out against it.” ***The first time Jonah immediately rejected it.*** The second time he reluctantly obeyed it. You can just see him trudging slowly toward Nineveh from the shore, fish guts and saltwater still soaking his clothes; head bowed, resigned to his fate. What could he do?

He must have thought, if I try to climb a mountain ***a billy goat*** will ram me right back here; if I try to run into the ***desert jackals*** will chase me back here, nipping my heels all the way.

There’s an important lesson here. ***Everyone has the choice to receive God’s Word the easy way or the hard way.*** God’s Word WILL be accomplished, it’s just a question of how much suffering we will have to endure between our rejection of His Word and our obedience to it.

* God said, ***“Go to Nineveh.”*** Jonah said no. He wound up in Nineveh, just after a nasty hurricane and 3 days in a fish.
* God told Pharaoh, ***“Let my people go.”*** Pharaoh said no. He wound up letting the Israelites go, but only after 10 plagues decimated his country and left his firstborn son dead in his bed.
* God told Israel, ***“Conquer the land.”*** The nation said no. They wound up conquering the land, but only after 40 years in the desert and over a million funerals.
* Now, catch the point here. Jesus said, ***“Go and make disciples of ALL NATIONS.”*** That command of God’s Word WILL BE ACCOMPLISHED. But how much suffering and loss must we endure as we RESIST that command before we finally receive it as the primary mission of all of our lives?

***Pastor, are you saying missions is easy?*** No. bringing the gospel where it has not been heard has always been a challenge. Sometimes the biggest challenge is bringing the gospel where it HAS been heard. The point here in Jonah, and the purpose of this series, is to challenge all of us to hear God’s word to US and receive it.

***Stop resisting God’s call. It is only making you miserable.*** That’s what I’m saying. That’s what Jonah would say if he were here today. Obeying God’s assignment for you will not be easy - but it will be much easier than resisting that call. That’s where the real pain and frustration are found.

And we all know this to be the case. **The worst condition in life is not that of the non-Christian**. The non-believer is happy in his sin. He doesn’t feel conviction or guilt - at least not much. He can go about his life simply enjoying his selfishness and sin.

***The worst condition in life is of the Christian who is not living in obedience to the Lord.*** Because he is miserable. He is living under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, grieving the Holy Spirit, and constantly feeling the guilt for the sin he knows he is committing. James says, “Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and does not do it, sins.”

***The great problem with God’s Word is that it is unmistakable.*** You hear God’s voice just fine. If you don’t, you are probably not yet a Christian. But if you are a Christian and you hear God leading you to do things, you will be frustrated and conflicted until you do them. I’m not trying to lay guilt on you, I’m trying to free you from that guilt. I’m not trying to add to your frustration and conflictedness, I’m trying to show you the way to escape from it!

**We are all so much like Jonah**. We hear God’s Word and we run the other way. How many people have you known who tell their story like this: I told God the two things I would never do: I would never be a missionary and never live in Africa. What did you just guarantee? Lord, I will never live in the inner city, and I will never work with the homeless. Watch out! Lord, I will never marry a preacher; I will never be a pastor’s wife. That one’s not true for Kristin or Emma - they both pretty much wanted what they got. But I’ve heard that line from other pastors about their wives.

Instead of resisting and rejecting God’s Word, **we need to learn how to RECEIVE IT**. How do we do that? It’s all about your relationship with God. Like any relationship, you have to make the time. This should be our most important relationship of all - so ***prioritize your time with the Lord***. Read the Bible. Pray through what you read. As the Lord leads you, WRITE DOWN those leadings. As you hear ideas and start working out plans, SHARE THEM. Get input. Clarify, improve those plans and ideas. The high probability is that the Lord is already leading some friends of yours along the same lines so you can encourage them and stir each other up to love and good deeds.

Let’s say the Lord has been leading you to ***reach out to a neighbor across the street***. You see him all the time, you’ve had a few conversations. You know you just need to take the next opportunity, walk over there and not be in a rush to leave. It’s hard to really get to know someone when your whole relationship is a WAVE. You feel the leading of the Lord, you pray about it, you write it down, you share it with a friend. What happens next? That friend is going to text you! How did it go? Was he there today? If not today, will you catch him tomorrow?

The book of Jonah doesn’t give us ANY DETAILS about how the Lord spoke to Jonah. The most vital detail this book gives us is the importance of that **FIRST STEP**. In chapter one, Jonah immediately went the opposite direction. In chapter 3:

1. **Receive** God’s Word

“So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.” Jonah 3:3

That’s the same phrase recorded in 2 Kings 14 that King Jeroboam 2 restored the borders of Israel “***according to the word of the Lord*** spoken through the prophet Jonah the son of Amittai.” It’s a powerful statement about the role of a prophet. That was Jonah’s whole job - to live his life and build his ministry “according to the word of the Lord.”

**The Word of God shows us the WILL of God**, like a path for us to follow. Jonah chose to go the opposite direction and paid the price for it. But now, finally, he lines up his life “according to the word of the Lord.”

***What about us?*** Do we receive God’s Word in this way, with a commitment to OBEY it - to align our lives around God’s Will as we grow in our understanding of it?

Remember the **PARABLE OF THE SOILS**. When the seed of God’s Word hits hard ground it just bounces off and the devil snatches it away like a bird. If the seed falls into shallow, rocky soil it may prompt some joy at first, but it can’t take root because the soil is too shallow. If the seed falls into thorny soil it may start to grow but eventually the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the plant and kill it. How does Jesus describe the GOOD SOIL?

1. **Receive** God’s Word
	* Hear > Believe > Obey

“But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” Mark 4:20

Notice the ***three necessary steps to RECEIVING God’s Word*** - first, you have to ***hear it***. Jesus frequently said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Lots of people came to listen to Jesus, but most did not have ears to hear. Second you have to accept it - you have to hear the Word of God with faith to ***believe it*** and receive it into your heart and life. And third, you have to ***obey it*** - allowing that seed of God’s Word to take root in your heart so it bears fruit in your life.

I tried to find a better acronym for receiving God’s Word, but this is how Jesus presents it: HBO. Hear. Believe. Obey. One good thing comes from **HBO** - but that’s it.

As you read the Bible every day, ***do you read to really hear from the Lord?*** Do you believe it - receiving God’s Word with faith? Do you obey it - letting it change you and shape you?

A helpful habit for Bible reading is to write down every time you read Scripture an:

* ***“I believe…” and “I will…” statement.***
* It’s even better if you share that in a private Bible reading group in Youversion or a group chat with a friend or accountability partner.
1. **Receive** God’s Word
	* “I believe…” and “I will…”

“But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” Mark 4:20

Jonah finally, reluctantly, heard the Word of the Lord and obeyed it. As we hear God’s Word today, this week and throughout this series, ***let’s be quicker to obey than Jonah was***. We will close the service today giving you time to write your “I believe” and “I will” statements for this morning as we seek to study Jonah 3 with ears to hear, hearts to believe and commitments to obey.

***Let’s not be like the foolish man who built his house on the sand.*** That’s how Jesus described the person who heard his words and did not put them into practice. The wise man is not the one who hears the words of Jesus and UNDERSTANDS them, but the one who hears them and OBEYS them. We tend to stop at that point of understanding - short of action. And what that reveals is that we didn’t really understand after all.

Oh, ***we do like the hard way***, don’t we? We like the storms and the timeouts in a fish. We like wandering in the desert. Let’s try the easy way instead - hear, believe, obey.

That’s our first application - receive God’s Word. The second application for today is to SHARE it.

1. **Share** God’s Word

“Jonah began to go into the city… and he called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.’” Jonah 3:4

Again, ***this is not exemplary preaching***. Your “I will” statement for today should not be, “Go visit neighbor and say, ‘Hey, in 40 days and your life will be overthrown!’” God told Jonah to speak AGAINST the city of Nineveh - which Jonah certainly did. But God also told Jonah to speak the message He would give him - and we can’t be sure that’s what Jonah did. Jonah’s pattern seems to be absolutely minimum obedience to not be thrown back into a storm and a fish.

The city took ***3 days to walk across***. Jonah went 1 day’s walk in and said his eight words. Yes, he “called out” the words. Maybe he elaborated. Maybe he spoke about the justice and power of God. Maybe he kept walking and re-stating his message so more people could hear. But the only record we have is that he called out those 8 words: “Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

And yet, that minimal obedience, that shallow, half-hearted message still cut through to the hearts of the Ninevites.

1. **Share** God’s Word

“And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.” Jonah 3:5

When judgment was proclaimed against them, these violent, godless **pagans BELIEVED**. It wasn’t Jonah they believed - ***it was GOD they believed***. Confronted with their sinfulness and the judgment that sin demanded, they acknowledged the truth of it. They RECEIVED the word of God by hearing, believing and obeying.

***Did Jonah actually call them to REPENT?*** Did Jonah give them any hope in the grace and mercy of God? He admitted in chapter 4 that was his fear. But there is no evidence in his message that he gave any hope or provided any call to response. But the Ninevites applied the knowledge they had of other gods to their relationship with Jonah’s God - just as the sailors did in chapter 1. If they knew another god was angry at them, they would petition that god with signs of sincere repentance and devotion - fasting, praying, wearing sackcloth, sitting in ashes.

They abandoned all of the comforts of life - food, comfortable clothes, furniture. And it didn’t stop with just the common people - it was the whole city! This was true revival - unprecedented response for an entire city to repent as one.

1. **Share** God’s Word

“The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.” Jonah 3:6

Notice this small detail - “the word” reached the king. What word? Jonah’s 8 word declaration? That simple message of coming judgment. I mean, if nothing else, modern politicians would have said, “Hey, we have 40 days. Let’s form a committee on religion to assess the seriousness level of this threat. Let’s not panic. We have time. We’ve seen these Israelites before - probably nothing major to worry about.” They could have delayed response. They could have found reasons to not respond.

But ***the WORD OF GOD cut through all pretenses***, all objections, all excuses and delay tactics. There is no thought of that. The message of Jonah spread throughout the city and got all the way to the throne room. And from there, it accelerated!

1. **Share** God’s Word

“And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast… taste anything…” Jonah 3:7

This is the **best case scenario** when you share the gospel - that those who first hear the message ***start helping to spread the word***. This is the original VIRAL VIDEO. No technology was needed. From one person to the next, from one family to the next - the message of a coming judgment spread all over the city. The king’s decree simply confirmed what the people were already doing. And look what the king added, covering all of his bases:

1. **Share** God’s Word

“But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands…” Jonah 3:8

You have to love ***the inclusion of the animals***. Even the pets and livestock are commanded to put on sackcloth. Imagine the looks on the faces of the cattle, sheep and goats as they were suddenly draped in hot, scratchy sackcloth and drizzled with ashes. The point is - this affects ALL OF US. The judgment of God would have fallen on man and beast alike, so the king reasoned, let’s get the animals in on the repentance and have them call out to God in whatever way they can. Not sure how that part of the directive was supposed to be carried out - but you have to admire the king’s thoroughness, if nothing else.

And don’t miss **the explicit call to repentance here** from the king. Repentance was implied in the fasting, sackcloth and ashes. But the king spelled it out. Whether Jonah confronted it or not, whether Jonah called for repentance and faith or not, the message got through.

This illustrates ***the truth of Romans 1*** - that all people know deep down that there is a Creator God who made this world and everything in it. They all know that a God exists, but they suppress that truth by their wickedness and exchange the worship of the true God for the worship of things in this world. And so as people exchange truth for lies, God for idols, God gives them over to their idolatry. He releases them into the sin they have chosen.

But all people know these **two facts** - there is a God and I don’t deserve His favor. The king of Nineveh was, no doubt, the worst offender when it came to evil ways and violence in his hands. But he not only committed himself to turn from his evil ways, he called the entire city to follow his example. And look at the message of hope with which he concludes:

1. **Share** God’s Word

“Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” Jonah 3:9

This is amazing. Jonah delivered the lamest gospel message ever. But **the KING of Nineveh** expanded on that message of judgment to add in an explicit call to repentance and prayer with the fragile hope that Jonah’s God might hear and turn from the judgment He had foretold.

***The prophet*** of God’s message was vague and grim. The pagan king’s message was clear and compelling. The prophet spoke only judgment. The pagan spoke words of hope. The prophet gave no call to action. The king gave specific steps to take. It’s another deliberately ironic contrast.

We had three vital steps to receive God’s Word - hear, believe, and obey. Here are three keys for sharing God’s Word: simple, faithful, hopeful.

1. **Share** God’s Word
	* Simple > Faithful > Hopeful

“Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” Jonah 3:9

To share God’s Word, **keep it simple**. We often make things very complicated, getting into details of technical theology that aren’t necessary. I had some evangelism training recently and we practiced sharing our **testimonies in just 30 seconds**. That’s a helpful skill to develop because it forces you to focus in on one very specific change God has made in your life. 30 seconds doesn’t give time for elaborate explanations about your life or about the gospel.

Start a timer:

“I used to go to church all the time but it didn’t mean much - I was just going through the motions. Then I experienced God’s love for me. Suddenly I saw what it meant that Jesus died on the cross for me. I trusted Jesus as my King and He has become the chief joy and purpose of my life!”

That’s how simple it can be. From empty attendance to purpose and joy, all hinging on the death of Jesus in my place. Keep it simple. ***Practice YOUR 30 second testimony.*** I’ve found that works really nicely with our little church invite cards. I keep a few in my wallet and will ask cashiers or people I run into - “Do you have a church you attend?” If they say no, I say:

“I used to go to church all the time but it didn’t mean much - I was just going through the motions. Then I experienced God’s love for me. Suddenly I saw what it meant that Jesus died on the cross for me. I trusted Jesus as my King and He has become the chief joy and purpose of my life!”

**Jonah was very half-hearted** in his declaration - but we do have to give him credit that ***he kept it simple***. 40 days and you burn. One of our boys explained the gospel to his younger brother that way: “You know you’re going to hell, right?” It can prompt a little soul searching. Keep it simple.

Second, **stay faithful**. It is not up to us to produce the fruit - God must give the growth. It is up to us to persevere - to continue; to faithfully share with the people around us. This is what the ***people of Nineveh and especially the king model for us*** - they sincerely devoted themselves to not only repenting and fasting, but also sharing this call with one another.

***Who are you reaching out to?*** Who is far from God that you continue to pray for? Don’t lose heart. Don’t give up. Keep praying, keep reaching out. Enlist others to pray with you. Be faithful. And as you keep praying for those you love most, also be faithful with the other people around you. Think about your friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers. Think about the places that you live, work, eat and play. God has not called you to reach everyone in Tampa Bay by yourself. But He has called you to reach the handful of people right next to you.

**Bless Every Home** is a helpful tool for this. Sign up on their website and they will send you 5 people to pray for every day. You can customize that to include family members, co-workers and friends in addition to your physical neighbors.

Keep it simple. Be faithful. And finally, **be hopeful**. As the king of Nineveh said, “Who knows? God may relent and turn from the destruction he has promised.” Apply that to your friends and family members who are far from the Lord. You don’t know how their story ends. They don’t know either. Trust the Lord with the hearts of those you love and stay hopeful. Keep praying. Keep believing. Keep sharing. When God saw the people of Nineveh turn from their sin, look at verse 10:

1. **Share** God’s Word

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.” Jonah 3:10

Jonah was frustrated with the mercy of God toward these wicked pagans, but we should celebrate the grace of the Lord - because ***WE ARE THE NINEVITES!*** Most of us are not Jewish - we are not the chosen people of God. We are Gentiles, far from the blessings and promises of God. Until Jesus.

Notice the clear and significant parallels between Jonah and Jesus.

* Jonah died - cast into the depths of the swirling chaos of the ocean.
* Jesus died - cast into the depths of our sin.
* Jonah rose again - rising from the ocean, sent to a people far from God.
* Jesus rose again - rising from the grave, sent to people like us - far from God.
* Jonah proclaimed God’s Word.
* Jesus proclaimed God’s Word - in fact, Jesus was the Word of God made flesh.

When the Ninevites saw Jonah, they recognized the significance of the fact ***that God had sent them a prophet*** - but more than a prophet - ***one who had died and come back from the dead***. That is probably the main reason they listened to his message. He was not just some guy who strolled into their city. He was clearly sent by God to turn them from death.

***Only someone who has escaped death can save us from death.*** Jonah was sent back as part of his repentance - a second chance to fulfill the mission God gave him. Jesus was raised to life as the fulfillment of his mission - the validation of everything he said and did. And so the sign of Jonah is another confirmation that Jesus is who He said He is. He is the Savior of the World - the Conquering King who offers us rescue from sin and death forever.

So RECEIVE the Word of God. Hear, believe, obey.

And SHARE the Word of God. Simple. Faithful. Hopeful.

Let’s pray.