

Text: Jonah 4:1-11

Title: Jonah's Lesson

Truth: God teaches Jonah that it is right to be concerned for evil people.

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Introduction

Jonah had a "second chance" from God. Nineveh also had a second chance. God illuminated them to the need through the preaching of a destroying judgment that would come upon them if they did not repent. Somewhat paradoxically, the preaching of judgment was itself a mercy from the Lord!

We also learned in chapter 3 how the Ninevites made good use of that opportunity to forestall judgment by repenting. God saw their 180 and relented from the disaster that he had promised. This raised some hard feelings inside of Jonah.

I. Jonah Displays a Lack of Full Repentance, v. 1-3

- A. Look at Jonah's emotions about this turn of events. He was very displeased and angry. His anger level rose as he saw what was developing in the city and how judgment was not going to occur.
- B. What exactly was Jonah mad about? (1) The people of Nineveh repented. Evidently his thought was that it was not right for them to have an opportunity to repent, nor to actually do so. (2) He was also angry about God relenting from the disaster. He felt that they deserved it because they were so wicked. Nineveh was evil; now it was "evil to Jonah" that they were not being punished, which means that Jonah thinks basically it is evil of God not to judge them. What a turnabout! Nineveh was in fact evil and did deserve judgment for what they did. But so is every sinful person and city and civilization.

Was Jonah upset because his "record" as a prophet would be damaged? He would be guilty of a false prophecy and thus discredited as a man of God. We alluded in our last study to a reason why this is not the case: there was an implicit condition attached to the 40-days-then-judgment proclamation. See

Jeremiah 36:1-3 for an example of the same thing, only in this case with God's people in Judah.

Go over that again: Jonah was mad that people repented, and that God was merciful. Is that logical? Are you ever angry about that sort of thing? It is entirely backwards. There is *joy* in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7, 10), not anger!

- C. I remember another situation like this: the Pharisees were angry that the Lord spent time with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:10-13, Luke 15:1-32). They were like the angry older brother who claimed that he never offended his father but was sore that he did not get to celebrate with his friends.
- D. Luke 18:9-14 tells the story of a Pharisee who was self-congratulatory and basically prayed to himself. It also tells of a tax collector who cried out to God for mercy. The tax collector was justified by his faith. The Pharisee was abased—not justified before God. Strangely, the Ninevites are like the tax collector in this parable, and Jonah is like the Pharisee! Now look at the point of the parable in Luke 18:9: there were those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. That sounds a lot like Jonah, does it not?
- E. Jonah is upset, so he prays. This is a good first instinct, I suppose. But what he says will expose his thinking and be a big embarrassment to his character. He starts out by saying, “Was not this what I said when I was still in my country?” Basically, “I knew this is what you were going to do, so it was useless for me to come here.” This is where his repentance shows itself to be incomplete.

God is teaching us something through Jonah. Let us be thankful that we can learn through the flawed experience of another instead of learning the hard way ourselves.
- F. We do not have a record of Jonah's reasoning in chapter 1 *before* he fled from God. But he says something here that gives us insight into the motivation. When reading Jonah 1, I most often imagine the prophet being disgusted at going to such a wicked people and not wanting to go out of revulsion and possibly also fear for his life.

Perhaps there were elements of that present in his mind. But the text of chapter 4 here gives a more nuanced insight.

Jonah reasoned that because God is gracious and merciful, He would give the Ninevites an opportunity to respond favorably and then withhold judgment. This judgment, Jonah was sure, was so deserved by the Ninevites that God should not say anything to them, not give them an opportunity to be converted, and then let the clock run out on mercy and finally pour out judgment in abundance. Exodus 34:6-7 does indeed teach us that God's character is merciful and forgiving. Jonah is right about that, and so Jonah is objecting to God as He really is, not some wrong version of God. But he is not right to make *that* along with his ethnic hatred an excuse for disobedience, nor as an excuse to be angry, nor as an excuse to want to die.

Go over that again: Jonah fled from God and disobeyed Him because he felt that God was probably going to be merciful to an evil people and relent from destroying them. What kind of logic is that? A person who has a character like God would rejoice that God was going to be merciful to others, because that person has himself experienced God's mercy!

- G. Jonah is thinking sinfully here. He is basically mad at God, upset that the Ninevites do not get what he thinks they deserve. I wonder if he was thinking about going back on his future sacrifices and vows to serve God (2:9). His promise at that point to be thankful seems to be failing.
- H. So Jonah prays that he would die. He is obviously depressed, we might say, but it is entirely self-inflicted. His depression is not an escape hatch or excuse. *He* selfishly created the circumstances in his own brain that made him feel badly, and those circumstances were *wrong*. Wrong thinking led to a wrong conclusion. Notice that he did not desire to take his own life, but told God to do it. He knew self-murder is wrong.
- I. "It is better for me to die than to live." WRONG. WRONG. WRONG. Jonah could not have been more wrong. He is not talking about the idea of Paul, that it is more needful to stay here, but to go and be with Christ is far better (Philippians 1:21, 23). That is a thought

tempered by reality. Jonah's thought is motivated by pure selfishness. To continue to live is to continue to experience God's mercy and goodness. It is to learn and grow. It is to be corrected of wrong thinking. To desire to cut that off is a sinful desire that would cut short many of God's blessings.

II. God Responds, v. 4

- A. Look at God's simple question: "Is it right for you to be angry?" Is it proper? Is it morally upright? God is rebuking the prophet with this question.
- B. The question is rhetorical. It makes in effect an assertion: "It is *wrong* for you to be angry." In question form, it begs a response from the prophet, trying to engage him to think about his sinful "logic."
- C. The question is repeated in a slightly different context in verse 9.

III. Object Lesson, v. 5-9

- A. Jonah went to the eastern outskirts of the city and set up shop there to see if what he thought was going to happen would happen. Maybe he hoped that God would destroy the city after all. Perhaps the city's repentance would be short-lived. So, he built a little shelter there and sat under its shade for a while to watch.
- B. God then improved his "shady situation" by creating (?) a plant that grew over Jonah. This would take up some heat from the sun and provide further relief for Jonah.
- C. The NKJV says he was "very grateful" for the plant. Jonah was happy about the plant, but I'm not certain that this was God-directed gratitude for it. It was a blessing, and it was from God, but did Jonah *get* this?

I recently heard a well-known secular doctor extolling the mental and medical value of gratitude. It is truly good for your health to be thankful. What he missed was the *direction* of the thanksgiving. He supposed that meditation or writing down things for which you are thankful is sufficient. And it is helpful, but the key is this: where do you direct your thanksgiving? Christians direct it toward God

because He is the ultimate source of all things. Paul modeled it: “we are bound to give thanks **to God** for you” (2 Thess. 2:13).

D. The next day, God brought two “judgments” against Jonah. **First**, he prepared a worm. This worm was a fast-eating type worm that ate up enough of the plant that it withered, so that its shading ability was destroyed. **Second**, God prepared a wind from the east, along with a hot sunny day. This “sirocco wind” blew off the desert and produced scorching heat. The sun beat down and caused Jonah to have what we would call in medical terms “heat stroke.” The average temperature there in that season could have been 110 degrees Fahrenheit. I read that the east wind could raise that temperature by 12 to 16 more degrees, making it an absolute scorcher. It would dry you out entirely.

Notice that God appointed the storm, the fish, the vine, the worm, and the east wind, not to mention the weather and the disposition in the Ninevites to want to repent, among many other details in the account.

E. The heat was a miserable situation. He wished to die, and said so, just like in verse 3. “It is better for me to die than to live.” **WRONG AGAIN!** Notice the self-inflicted nature of this.

If you are feeling very down and dejected and wondering what value there is in life, take a step back and look at what you are doing and thinking. Ask a trusted person like a parent or pastor or other Christian to help you evaluate the big picture. If you are ungrateful and judging people all the time instead of delighting in mercy, what do you expect?

F. Can you think of another course of action Jonah could have taken? Easily: he could have been thankful that God provided protection for the people of Nineveh—by Jonah’s mouth—and then he could have left the area and went back home. He did not need to subject himself to a miserable situation of waiting for God to destroy a city that He was not planning to destroy, and becoming angry about the east wind and the worm and the destroyed plant. Give it up, Jonah!

- G. God repeats the question to Jonah: Is it right for you to be angry?” But this time, the rhetorical question is about the plant: “It is NOT right for you to be angry about the plant.” Why is that? The plant did not belong to Jonah. He did not create it. He did not sustain it. It was not in his purview to control it or expect it to perform its function for him. Its existence was a grace from God.
- H. Jonah hard-heartedly responds, in effect, “Yes, it is right for me to be angry, even enough to die!” About a plant???. What a childish response. It was not right for him to be angry; it was not justified; it was not reasonable; it was not logical. It was purely selfish.

IV. The Point of the Object Lesson, v. 10-11

- A. Jonah was more concerned about the destruction of the plant than he was about the destruction of a city full of souls! IF he was concerned for the plant, why not be concerned—as God was—for the city and even its animals?

The mention of the animals is interesting. God, and righteous people in general, care for animals (Prov. 12:10). After all, He created them and there is an important purpose for them in the creation. Wanton destruction of any life is not what God nor His people do.

- B. God confronts Jonah because he had pity on the plant—a thing that he did not labor over, did not make it grow, lived for a day and died the next (it was of very little relative value compared to a human or animal). But he did not have any pity over a city of thousands of people.
- C. For neither the plant nor the city did Jonah work, create, cause it to flourish, etc. He had no say over anything—neither the plant, nor the city’s inhabitants.
- D. In similar manner, there was no human you created or caused to grow or cared for like God has done. If God decides to show mercy to that person, that is HIS prerogative. Who are *you* to be angry at God for what He decides to do in these matters?
- E. The city of Nineveh was a “great city” because of its population. In it were more than 120,000 persons who could not discern between

right hand and left, along with many animals. There is a question here as to the identification of these people. They could be young children under maybe 4 years old, in which case the city could have had a total population of 500,000 or more. For greater Nineveh, this may be realistic. That is doubted by some, so another suggestion is that this number covers the entire population, explaining that the “left vs. right” inability refers to their morally cluelessness. But the Bible does not give sound-minded adults an out. They are always morally culpable for their actions and without excuse.

- F. Ponder for a moment the contrast between Jonah and Abraham. Jonah wanted destruction. Abraham prayed that if there were 50 righteous people in Sodom that God would not destroy it. Then he walked this number down to 10 (Genesis 18:23-32). God promised Abraham that He would not destroy the city if there were 10 there. Now, I suspect Sodom was much smaller than greater Nineveh, and after the repentance episode, may have had more than 10 righteous people in it at the moment.

Conclusion

God’s rule over the world is exalted. He oversees the fish, the storm, the sirocco, the worm, the city, and everything else. He sovereignly gives mercy to whom He wills. He cares for the world’s inhabitants, even wicked ones. He has compassion on people. We submit to God’s rule, not deny His grace to people. But judgment is not postponed forever.

Jonah needed to learn Matthew 7:2 and James 2:13. If you do not like God’s mercy, then don’t take it for yourself. His own self-interest should have taught him that, but he was not concerned for others.

As for you, do you have any Jonah-like tendencies?

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