

THE POUTING PROPHET AND HIS MERCIFUL MASTER

JONAH 4

I.

A number of years ago a survey was taken of a random sample of several hundred American men. The respondents were asked to rank themselves in terms of their ability to get along with others. What percentage do you suppose ranked themselves in the top half of the population in their ability to get along with others--- in other words, what percentage said that they can get along with people better than the average American male? 100% They all did. Sixty per cent of them said that they get along with others better than 90% of other people. Twenty per cent of the men said that they are in the top 1% of all Americans in terms of their ability to get along with other people.

It would seem that the consideration and love that we Americans, at least we men, have for other people is not as great as we might think that it is. History has shown that there are dangers that result from the delusion that we have about our love for others. Joseph Stalin (PROJECTOR ON--- JOSEPH STALIN) professed to love the proletariat, the working class. Yet it is estimated that he was responsible for the deaths of as many as 60 million fellow Russians, many of them among the proletariat.

Mao Zedong (MAO ZEDONG) was proclaimed to be the savior of the Chinese people. He also claimed to be the great lover of his people. His personal physician wrote some years after his death, "**Mao never said a word about the suffering of people to me. The word 'regret' was not in his dictionary.**"

We Christians also fall short, at times, of the high standard of love for others to which we have been called. William Carey (WILLIAM CAREY) is known as the father of modern missions." As this Englishman studied his Bible in the 1700s, he began to sense a responsibility to bring the gospel to unbelievers in other parts of the world. When he presented his ideas about the need for world evangelism to a group of fellow ministers, one of them responded with words that reflected the general feeling of the group: "**Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.**" (PROJECTOR OFF)

We sing the song "They'll know we are Christians by our love." Are there gaps in our love? Jonah had a special connection with the God of the universe. He was a prophet who brought divine revelation to his

people in northern Israel in the ninth century BC. (PROJECTOR ON--- DIVIDED KINGDOM) The job was not easy. The kings and the people were resistant to his warnings to turn back to the God of Israel.

Then God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the chief city of Assyria. He did not want to do it. The Assyrians were the enemies of Israel. Other prophets of his day were beginning to warn Israel that the Assyrians were going to overrun their country if they did not get their act together spiritually. Jonah did not want to do anything that would help the enemies of his people. (JONAH 01) So he headed in the opposite direction. We have seen that the Lord intervened by causing a severe storm to threaten the ship in which Jonah was travelling. The sailors identified Jonah as being the cause of their distress. They tossed Jonah into the sea. Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. He finally acknowledged the error of his ways. Jonah was deposited on dry land.

We saw last week that he finally arrived in Nineveh, the largest city in the Middle East and the chief city of the Assyrians. (NINEVEH MAP) The reluctant prophet presented a simple and negative message to the people of that city: **"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown."** Another miracle followed when the king and most of the residents of the city turned from sin to the God that Jonah described. They put on sack cloth and ashes and fasted. I described some of the additional factors that the Lord may have put together to bring them to the point of this spiritual transformation.

Now in #4 we will look at Jonah's reaction to the spiritual transformation of Nineveh and God's reaction to Jonah. Out of this we will look for lessons that might apply to us and our relationship to the hurting world around us.

II.

So in vv. 1-4 of Jonah #4, which is p. 775 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we are exposed to JONAH AND THE NEED TO SUBMIT TO GOD'S WILL. (II. JONAH AND THE NEED TO...) My suspicion is that vv. 1-4, along with v. 10 of the previous chapter, happen chronologically after vv. 5-11 in #4. It is only after Jonah sits in his tent under the shade of the plant that he finds out that God is not going to bring disaster upon Nineveh. But he arranges the material in this chapter in such a way as to most effectively leave his readers with the challenge from God about how they will respond to the world around them.

In v. 10 of the previous chapter we are told that God relented from the disaster which He threatened to bring upon Nineveh. Now in v. 1 of #4 we read, **"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry."** Literally, the text says something like this: **"But it was evil to Jonah--- a great evil--- and he was hot."** Jonah was not just mildly displeased. He was ticked off.

We might expect that a great spiritual awakening would make a prophet of God pretty excited. Something of this scope would have warranted a press conference--- or at least a missionary letter to his supporters with an appeal for funds to help with following up all of these new believers. Instead, Jonah is upset.

In v. 2 he goes to God in prayer. At least Jonah has enough sense to go to the right authority to talk about his feelings. The text tells us, **"And he prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.'"**

The last part of this verse sounds like it could be a reference to a doctrinal statement or some kind of creed. Indeed we find a basis for it in Exodus #34. After God writes the Ten Commandments for Moses a second time (EXODUS 34:6), we are told in v. 6, **"The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...'"**

So here for the first time in the story we find the beginning of Jonah's explanation for his refusal to go to Nineveh. Jonah has lived among the Israelites and preached to them without significant spiritual effect. Yet here in one short evangelistic campaign the entire leading city of their hostile neighbor to the north repents. Why doesn't God do that in Israel?

Worse than that, God has been warning Israel that he was raising up the Assyrians to overthrow them if they do not get their act together. Hosea and Amos were prophets who had their ministry in Israel at about the same time that Jonah lived. In Hosea #11 v. 5 (HOSEA 11:5) this prophet spoke of the Israelites, saying, **"They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me."**

Now that the Ninevites have repented, Israel's doom becomes even more certain. Perhaps Jonah thought, "If God would judge Nineveh, that would provide added weight to my warnings to Israel about the danger of divine judgment for sin. Maybe that would help my countrymen to repent. It would also give Israel more time to get its act together." But Nineveh repented, and God relented, and Jonah is angry about it. This prophet, who has been the object of God's compassion, has no compassion for the people of Nineveh. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jonah, it seems to me, is jealous about the spiritual well being of his own people. Did you ever have the experience of seeing someone come to Christ and then having them promptly lead their entire family to Christ also? And maybe you have been praying for your lost husband or wife or parent or child for five

years, ten years, twenty years--- and that person seems to be as spiritually dead as he or she ever was? And you are a bit jealous about what has happened to this other family.

Back in v. 3 of our text, Jonah continues his prayer, **"Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."** It is possible that Elijah had been a mentor for Jonah. At least Jonah would have been familiar with him. Elijah also got depressed at one point and wanted to die. He was the instrument of a great miracle on Mt. Carmel when he called down fire from heaven. But King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were still resistant. Elijah knew that there would be no national revival if the king and queen got on board. So he was depressed.

Jonah was a part of a spiritual awakening, but it happened among the enemies of his countrymen. So he was not happy, and he was ticked off with God about it. So he wanted God to take him out of the picture.

Jonah was acting childishly. He was trying to manipulate God. We can be like that, can't we? When we encounter tragedies, bad health news, financial reversals, relationship difficulties, unexpected deaths, we are tempted to get mad at God. We decide that we are going to stop going to church. We tell God that we can't trust Him. His will makes no sense to us.

Notice v. 4: **"And the Lord said, 'Do you do well to be angry?'"** God ignores Jonah's request. It is a childish request. He is out of the will of God but not out of the love of God. Also the Lord does not strike Jonah down. He doesn't fire him. He doesn't even ball him out. He simply asks a probing question. Are you right to be angry? Are there any reasonable grounds that you have to be upset?

With whom is Jonah dealing? He is the Creator of the universe. He is infinite in wisdom, all powerful, all-knowing. He sees the future. He understands the consequences of every action.

Furthermore, He is all loving. He chose to bless Jonah's people. They were not deserving of it. He also chose Jonah to be His prophet. He gave special revelation to Jonah. He gave wonderful promises to His people. He loved them enough to discipline them. Should He not show similar love and kindness to the people of Nineveh? What right does Jonah have to be angry? Jonah is resisting God's will and trying to manipulate god.

How often do we try to manipulate God? If you do this, God, then I will do this. If you don't do this, then I will do this. There are bad things happening around me and to me. They make no sense. Why should I follow you?

He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He is all-wise, all-just, all-loving. He understands us completely and the people around us. He offers us eternal life and an unbelievable wonderful eternity. Should we not submit to His revealed will?

III.

In vv. 5-11 we come to JONAH AND THE NEED TO SHOW GOD'S LOVE TO LOST PEOPLE. (PROJECTOR ON-- III. JONAH AND THE NEED TO...) These verses seem to happen chronologically before the previous section. For here Jonah seems to set himself up to see what will happen in Nineveh. Probably these events happen during the 40 days of threatened divine judgment. Only at the end of this time can Jonah see that God is relenting from His threatened judgment.

A.

Thus in vv. 5-8 we find that JONAH AND GOD'S PEOPLE NEED TO BE ON GUARD AGAINST MISPLACED VALUES. (III. A. JONAH AND GOD'S PEOPLE NEED TO...) According to v. 5, **"Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city."**

It would seem that Jonah arrived on the west side of Nineveh when he began his evangelistic campaign. After making his way through the city, he ended up on the east side of Nineveh. Now he is waiting to see what will happen. He seems to be hoping to see fireworks, to see God overthrow the city. He puts together a temporary structure. The word that is used is the Hebrew word for "tabernacles," which is related to the seven day Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, which just concluded this past week. The Hebrew people were instructed to build tents for seven days each year to remind them of their forty year journey in the wilderness after coming out of Egypt.

The vicinity around Nineveh tends to be barren of trees, like our own area. (NINEVEH 06) Nineveh had other similarities to Las Vegas. They both have a reputation for the violation of God's standards. Nineveh was located near the Tigris River, as Las Vegas is located near the Colorado River. Nineveh was at a longitude of 36 degrees 10 minutes north. Las Vegas is at 36 degrees 21 minutes north. The climate of both cities is very similar.

Jesus in His day sat east of another city that was threatened with judgment. (JERUSALEM EAST) The people of Jerusalem were guilty of another kind of sin. They had rejected their own Messiah. But Jesus had a different attitude toward this city than did Jonah toward Nineveh. As He sat on the Mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem, Jesus told His disciples (LUKE 13:34), according to Luke #13, **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often**

would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and were not willing!" His attitude was marked by compassion.

Here we sit today in Boulder City, to the east and a little south of Las Vegas. We are happy that we are not Las Vegas. We are happy that we do not have the crime and the gambling that mark Las Vegas. We are happy that we live in a conservative community. But what will be our attitude toward Las Vegas? Will it be more like that of Jonah, or that of Jesus? Will we exercise compassion toward our Nineveh?

According to v. 6 in our text, **"Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant."** (CASTOR OIL PLANT) The suspicion of many is that this was a castor oil plant. It is fast growing and has broad leaves that provide shade. The implication seems to be that this is the warm part of the year. The plant provided extra relief for Jonah, who was holed up in his little shack or tent.

The original text says that the plant saved Jonah from his evil. There is perhaps a double intention at work here in the use of this term. The plant saved Jonah from the badness of his physical situation. But it also becomes part of God's plan to save Jonah from the badness of his own attitude. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The text also says that Jonah was exceedingly glad, or happy, about his circumstances. This is the only time in the whole story where Jonah is happy. What makes him happy is not the spiritual transformation of Nineveh, but the appearance of a plant.

Verse 7 says, **"But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered."** This was probably some type of weevil. The sovereign God appointed a storm, a great fish, a plant and now a worm. He is using them all to bring this pouting prophet to maturity. Jonah is perhaps something like this worm, in that he is wanting the destruction of God's creation in the form of the people of Nineveh.

Verse 8: **"When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'"** The wind is called a sirocco. It is a dry, hot wind that can appear quickly in this part of the world and can raise temperatures 10-20 degrees in a short period of time. Jonah is physically drained by this wind. He wants Nineveh to be torched, but he is scorched. The Lord is clearly less concerned about his physical comfort than his spiritual development.

Again Jonah wants to die. Such is the nature of his misplaced values. He is happy when he is personally comfortable and depressed and angry when he is uncomfortable. He is reminded in a negative way about the spiritual awakening in Nineveh, which makes him unhappy.

We also struggle at times with misplaced values. We are tempted to buy into our culture's attachment to personal comfort and professional success and material acquisitions. If and when we lack these things, we are tempted to be unhappy. Richard Simmons III is the founder and executive director of The Center for Executive Leadership. In his book *The True Measure of a Man*, he notes that America has shifted from a production economy to a consumer economy. As a result, we measure ourselves not by what we do but by what we own. Our work is a means to our wealth. In a culture driven by social media and instant celebrity, we measure ourselves by how others measure us. Simmons quotes Professor Christopher Lasch, who observed that people "**would rather be envied for their material success than respected for their character.**" Such is one aspect of the misplaced values toward which we are tempted to pursue. God's people need to be on guard against misplaced values.

B.

Then in vv. 9-11 we find that JONAH AND GOD'S PEOPLE NEED TO SHOW GOD'S COMPASSION FOR THE LOST. (III. B. JONAH AND GOD'S PEOPLE NEED TO SHOW...) According to v. 9, "**But 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.'**" The Lord does not ream Jonah out. He does not strike him down. He reasons with Jonah. He asks a perceptive question. Jonah's answer reveals his misplaced values and his lack of compassion for the lost. It is all about his self-righteousness and his comfort and his interest in a stupid plant.

Verse 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.'**" The Hebrew word for "pity" is *hesed*. It means "loyal love." It is the word that is used in the Old Testament for God's love for His people. It is a committed love. It is the love of God associated with his covenant with Israel.

Here the Lord says that this is the love that Jonah has for a plant. It is not for the Creator of the plant. It is for a plant which was around for a very short time. What kind of sense does this make?

So here comes the kicker in v. 11: "**And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from the left, and also much cattle?**" The expression about distinguishing between the right hand and the left hand appears five times in the Old Testament. In its other usages it refers to deviations from God's law and revelation. The people of Nineveh have had exposure only to God's general revelation. Until now, they have not had exposure to God's revealed will. So the Bible scholars generally understand the reference here to be to the entire population of Nineveh, not just to children.

The reference to cattle is also worth noting. God's care apparently extends to the animal world. Jonah has expressed concern for the plant world. The reference by the Lord to cattle suggests that animals rank a little higher on His scale than do plants. There is perhaps some encouragement here for pet owners.

There are some critics of the Bible who have argued that the God of the Old Testament is nothing but an angry, vindictive Being. Richard Dawkins, the Oxford University biologist and author of *The God Delusion*, writes, **"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."** Richard Dawkins needs to read Jonah. We see something here of the compassionate character of the God who is really there.

"And should not 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?" Here is the challenge for us. Do we have God's compassion for the lost world around us? Or are our values as misplaced as Jonah's were? Are we concerned about the work of world missions? Do I care about the spiritual status of my neighbor? Am I at least praying for him or her or them?

God inflicted Jonah with a little suffering in his situation in the desert to the east of Nineveh, waiting to see if destruction would fall upon that great city. That suffering was intended to get Jonah's attention off of himself and onto the needy, spiritual predicament of the 120,000 people just to his west. How do we respond to suffering? Does it just make us bitter like Jonah, or does it make us better?

The book ends with a question and a challenge to Jonah. The impression with which we are left is that Jonah is a bitter, resentful man who has not grasped the important lesson that God has wanted him to learn about the compassionate concern for people that the God who is really there has, a concern that He wants so much for His representatives to share.

But then we must remember that this book shares details of the life of Jonah that only this prodigal prophet could know. He describes his feelings and his thoughts and his experience inside of a great fish and his conversations with God. Only Jonah could know these things. I suspect that only he could have written this book. If indeed this is the case, then the implication is that this is a confessional. Jonah has learned a painful lesson, and he wants his fellow Israelites to learn the same lesson. The Lord wants His followers who live almost 3000 years after Jonah walked upon the earth to learn the same lesson.

God wants us to have a compassionate concern for Democrats, for establishment Republicans, for Tea Party conservatives, for the LGBT community, for illegal immigrants. for Planned Parenthood supporters, for Muslims, for our neighbors. It is these for whom Christ died. It is us for whom Christ died.

Part of what Michelangelo (JONAH 06) painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City is entitled "The Prophets and the Apostles." The art critics claim that of all of the people who are pictured in this work of art, Jonah has the most radiant countenance. (JONAH 05) The reason is that Michelangelo believed that Jonah came to realize that God had extended His grace to him in spite of Jonah's resistance to recognizing and accepting God's compassion for the lost, and that Jonah had also come to learn the importance of demonstrating that compassion to lost people. The question that is left for us is: Will we learn that lesson? Will we show God's compassion for the lost?