

JONAH: DEVELOPING A CONCERN LIKE GOD'S

Series: As God's Messenger, Should I Not Be Concerned?

by Doug Goins

At the end of our study in Jonah 3 there was an incredible revival in process in the Assyrian city of Nineveh. This revival was a result of Jonah's obedience to God when he preached God's impending judgment on that wicked city. "He cried, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them." God's message of judgment against evil is always good news. His purpose in confronting sin is for people to repent so that they can be restored to relationship with him.

It is said of God in chapter 3 that, at least from a human perspective, he changed his mind. But we saw clearly that God in his justice always desires to eradicate sin and never changes his mind about that. He will do it if need be by destroying sinners who refuse to give up their sin; he hates sin and its consequences that much. But in his compassion he would always prefer to forgive a sinner who turns away from sin and to him for forgiveness. At the heart of Jonah's message of judgment is God's desire to bring repentance and restoration. In chapter 3 verse 10 that is exactly what God did. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it."

Try to put yourself in Jonah's place as he surveys this incredible response to the word of the Lord. The Ninevites hear the good news wrapped up in the bad news of judgment, and the entire city repents of its evil ways; all the people put on sackcloth, sit in ashes, and fast because they believe God. How would you feel if you were, say, leading a Bible study and everyone in the study responded in a mass movement to the good news of the Scriptures and turned their lives over to Christ? Wouldn't you be excited? Let's look at Jonah's response...

A STUBBORN MAN

(Jonah 4:1-4)

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

It can't be understated; these are the strongest possible words. What Jonah has suspected all along--the reason he disobeyed God's call to go to Nineveh in chapter 1--actually comes to pass. We saw Jonah run away from God at his first call, run back to God in prayer when he was sinking to his death in the depths of the ocean, and run with God in obedience proclaiming the message to Nineveh. Now in chapter 4 we will see him run way out ahead of God as he tries to usurp God's position of sovereign authority and questions God's mercy and forgiveness toward the Ninevites.

You may wish that the story had ended with chapter 3, but chapter 4 continues to unfold God's tough love for Jonah. God continues to dialogue with Jonah and work on his behalf because he cares so much about him. God isn't satisfied with mere compliance, which is what he got from Jonah in chapter 3 when he preached judgment. What God wants is for Jonah to learn to value what God values. Jonah's heart has not changed since his original call in chapter 1.

What we are going to find out is that Jonah is just as guilty of idolatry as the pagans he satirized back in chapter 2

verse 8 when he said in prayer:

**"Those who pay regard to worthless idols
forsake their true loyalty."**

Jonah's idol is Jonah. He is more committed to his own concepts of God and how God should act than he is to God himself. All of his protestations of love for the Lord and for his nation in his prayer in chapter 2 were like a projection of his love for himself. He is still clinging to his prejudice that God is the exclusive possession of Israel; that God is his own personal God. Jonah has developed a theological system in which he has locked God into a box to which he has the key, and he isn't going to let God out. Jonah's theology has become an expression of his stubborn will. His hard heart says, "This is what I believe about God, and even God himself isn't going to change it." That is one of the dangers, by the way, of air-tight theological systems in which we have carefully and neatly fitted everything together. The problem with systematic theology is that it can lock God in so tightly that it omits his freedom to be the sovereign Lord of the universe.

In chapter 2 we saw that this attitude put Jonah into mortal danger. He called out to God for help, and God rescued him. At that time the prophet confessed his need, and he said almost exactly all the right words in his psalm in chapter 2. But he never really repented of his sin, for now he continues to object to God's extending his mercy to Gentiles. Never in the first three chapters did Jonah ever say, "I'm wrong and you're right. You're God; you can do anything you please and forgive whomever you wish. Please forgive my narrowness, rigidity, and judgmentalism."

Jonah's problem is that he wants to control God. And what do any of us do when we can't control circumstances and get our own way? We get angry. (We may express our anger in a lot of different ways--perhaps passively.) In the verses that follow are two conversations between Jonah and his God; and each time Jonah speaks, what he expresses is petulant anger. And God's responses to Jonah's anger are amazing. In the middle of the chapter God gives Jonah some object lessons with a worm and a plant and the sun and the wind to help him understand his own confused heart. Let's look at Jonah's first prayer in verse 2. It is a very angry prayer:

And he prayed to the LORD and said, "I pray thee, 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 thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah is just as willfully stubborn now as he was when God called him back in his hometown of Gath-hepher. His prayer is a diatribe rather than an expression of honest devotion to the Lord. He is repeating the words that he has been taught from childhood, the description of the Lord in Exodus 34:6. The Old Testament is shot through with this image of God (Psalm 145 is a good example). But Jonah's awareness of God's nature becomes the basis not for adoration or submission, but for the audacity to get in God's face and challenge him.

Jonah understands that God's punishment can be turned aside, that out of God's *hesed*, his steadfast love, he will repent of evil because the Ninevites repented. But there is a strange, sarcastic twist in the way Jonah repeats the Scriptures back to the Lord. It is as if Jonah feels that he has been done a great evil because of God's goodness to the evil Ninevites. Jonah's anger is caused by his realization that he can't manipulate God; he can't get God to change his mind and carry out Jonah's will that those Ninevites ought to be destroyed for their wickedness.

For a willful, controlling person--and here I speak from some experience; it takes one to know one--there is nothing as frustrating as not being able to control events or circumstances or people, especially not being able to control God's direction and activity and purpose. So in his thinking Jonah runs way out ahead of God, and he ends up out there all by himself. Then his destructive anger seems to turn into self-destructive despair, which is the basis of his request that God take his life. The only thing left for Jonah to control is whether he lives or dies. And he tries to exercise this last area of willfulness by pronouncing his own death sentence and demanding that God carry it out. (Haven't we heard this before? Back in chapter 1 he was manipulating the Phoenician sailors in the

same way: "It's all my fault; throw me overboard and the storm will stop.") In his statement, "It is better for me to die than to live," he is talking to the God of the universe, the God of life and death. Jonah is still trying to tell God what is best and what God ought to do about it.

I don't know what you would feel like if you were in God's place having to respond to Jonah at this point, but look at God's response in verse 4:

And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

God doesn't respond to anger with anger. There is no thundering rebuke of Jonah; just a gentle, thoughtful question. Ignoring Jonah's death wish, he addresses the issue of his anger. He is calling this suicidal prophet to a self-examination of his willfulness. Think about it logically: if anybody has a right to be angry with the Ninevites, it is God, who hates sin, destructive evil, and violence. And yet he chose to offer them forgiveness. So implied in God's question is, who is Jonah to be angry when God chose not to destroy Nineveh? Remember, Jonah knows that it says in the Pentateuch, "Vengeance is mine, and recompense" (Deuteronomy 32:35). That is God's call, not Jonah's.

We play God when we continue to be angry at individuals or groups of people whom God has forgiven, when we take their punishment into our own hands through a negative attitude, vindictive words, or even hostile, destructive actions. We are running out ahead of God in meting out what we think justice demands. God asks us just as he asked Jonah, "Is that your right?" Divine logic drives us to only one answer: "No, Lord, it is your right, not mine. I don't do well to be angry." But look at how Jonah responds...

A PREJUDICED MAN

(Jonah 4:5)

Then 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.

Jonah turns his back and walks away from God. He doesn't even answer God's direct question, but his defiant attitude and actions indicate his reply. (Notice that he doesn't kill himself either, by the way.) He leaves the city, builds a little shelter, and sits down under it, peering out over the city. My conviction is that he is hoping that the Ninevites will blow it and return to their wickedness, which will prove him right and God wrong. Think of how prejudiced he is toward the Ninevites: "You can never trust the word of a Ninevite. Once a Ninevite, always a Ninevite. God, you're being too hasty in this blanket forgiveness. Just give them a little time, they'll hang themselves." He has a ringside seat above the city from which to watch the fire and brimstone. He still knows he is right and God is wrong.

There is an amazing contrast between this prophet perched above the city sulking in his little shelter and the king of Nineveh. Let's look back at chapter 3 verse 6: "The tidings reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes." Jonah is totally unrepentant. Yet here is the wicked king getting down off his throne, sitting on the floor in ashes of humility before the Lord, covering himself with sackcloth, and mourning over his own sinfulness. These two men in leadership are sitting in two very different places with two very different perspectives on what God is doing.

GOD'S OBJECT LESSON

(Jonah 4:6-8a)

I confess that I would have given up on Jonah long before this. But look at God's next move in verses 6-8a:

And 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. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a sultry east wind [a sirocco],

and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he was faint....

This is amazing to me. God persists in his *hesed*, his steadfast love, for Jonah in spite of Jonah's angry silence and defiant withdrawal to the rim rock above the city. God won't give up on him. Just as he appointed the great fish, he appoints a plant to grow for a special purpose, and then a worm and a sultry east wind. As I suggested earlier, God is turning all the forces of nature to use them for Jonah's salvation, moving heaven and earth because he loves this man so much.

Jonah has built himself a little shelter out of twigs and stones that provides very minimal shade. So God appoints a plant to grow that gives lots of shade from the sun. But the purpose of the shade tree is much more than just physical comfort. The phrase in Hebrew is a beautiful play on words that can be understood in two ways. The verb to save can be translated "to shade." And the word discomfort can be translated "evil" or "wickedness" or "trouble." The word is used that way in chapter 1 to talk about the evil or trouble that had come on the ship because of someone's sin and in chapter 2 to describe the Ninevites' wickedness. The words can be used interchangeably so that you have two different ideas at the same time in that little phrase. Literally, God sends the plant to shade him from his discomfort, referring to the sun; and to deliver him from his wickedness, referring to Jonah's unjustified anger. Remember, Jonah, as the author, chose the words to describe God's action, so he created the double meaning. This kind gift of the shade plant is not only to keep Jonah out of the sun but to remind him of God's grace and goodness, which he doesn't deserve at all.

The second half of verse 6 tells us that Jonah was "absolutely delighted" over the shade plant. This is the only time in the entire book that Jonah is happy about anything, and it has to do with his personal comfort. There is an amazing irony here. He is delighted with the shade, but he is still no more compassionate toward Nineveh despite this evidence of God's compassion for his own discomfort and his own wickedness. Since Jonah is unwilling to connect God's grace to him with God's grace to Nineveh, the Lord sends a worm to destroy the plant and deprive Jonah of his shade.

Then comes the sirocco of probably 110 or 120 degrees blasting out of the eastern desert and dehydrating him. The shade is gone now and the sun beats down intensely. In another word play, the Hebrew word for anger is synonymous with heat; we talk about being hot under the collar. It is as if God is saying, "Okay, if you're going to persist in your angry rebellion against me, I'll make it really hot for you so you can get the point." So Jonah is faint from the sun, experiencing heat stroke.

A CONFUSED MAN

(Jonah 4:8b-9a)

And now comes Jonah's second conversation with God, which concludes the story. Verses 8b-9:

...and he asked that he might die, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?"

It is clear from God's response to Jonah that his request to die comes from anger over the loss of the plant. He repeats his earlier death wish. Now, the gift of the plant was God's way of helping Jonah answer his earlier question, "Do you do well to be angry?" The plant symbolized to this prophet God's mercy on Nineveh. And God wanted Jonah to understand how wrong it was for him to be angry about God's intervention to save the city. The death of the plant symbolizes the removal of God's mercy from Jonah, just as God might have chosen to remove his mercy from Nineveh if he had followed Jonah's desires. Jonah is very thankful for the plant, and he should have been thankful for God's kindness to Nineveh. However, he is very angry when the plant dies, yet he would have been delighted if the mercy of God had been denied to Nineveh and they had died. God is trying to show Jonah how confused his thinking is, valuing a plant but disdaining a whole nation of people.

God asks the question again, "Do you do well to be angry?" He is putting Jonah on the spot, trying to back him

into a corner to deal with his rebellion. Look at Jonah's answer in the middle of verse 9:

And he said, "I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

His answer shows something frightening: He isn't willing to live with the God who can give grace to or take grace away from whomever he sovereignly chooses, Jew or Gentile. There is an ambivalence in Jonah's heart that we have seen throughout the whole book. He can't stand the thought of God's extending his grace to the Ninevites; and yet he knows that he can't live without that grace himself. He finally understands that he can't have it both ways, God's speaking judgment to the Ninevites but grace and mercy to him and to the Jewish nation. Since Jonah can't convince God that his kindness to people who repent is wrong, he wants to die. Jonah is saying, "I'm going to win the final round in this power struggle. There is no way that you're going to beat me in this one, Lord." Back in chapter 1 Jonah would rather have died than obey what God said. Here it's very different--Jonah would rather die than admit that he is wrong. The root of his rebellion is idolatrous pride.

When I was a youth pastor in Los Angeles a number of years ago I was in a ministry with a woman who, in deep grief, came into our church for counseling. After years of marital conflict, her husband committed suicide, and in his suicide note he said that he had killed himself because of how she had treated him through all their years of marriage. So this woman was left to live with not only the grief of his death but the guilt she was having to carry because of the blame he imposed on her. What a way to win a battle for control! Her husband was saying, "If I can't control you in life, then I will control you in death."

That is the statement Jonah is making to God. In his demand to die he is angrily blaming the God from whom he wants to escape into death. Running away to Tarshish hadn't worked, and so now he wants separation from this God of mercy whom he has come to abhor. He abhors God because he can't control to whom God will show his mercy.

GOD'S PITY (4:10-11)

It moves me deeply that even though Jonah is willing to give up on God, God can't deny his own nature of mercy, longsuffering, and patience. He won't give up on Jonah. Look at God's final word in verses 10-11. God contrasts his own heart of mercy for the world with Jonah's cold, hard, pitiless heart:

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 should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Jonah's pity on the plant is a projection of his own self-pity. Yet if he thought he had a right to this pity for himself, didn't God have a right to pity Nineveh?

There is a beautiful phrase in verse 11: "a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left." Interpreters in the nineteenth century thought that referred to a hundred and twenty thousand babies. But recent excavations and studies of population census listings have shown that the city would then have had to be three-quarters of a million people. There is no way it could have been that large. Recent studies in Semitic languages suggest that this is an idiomatic expression for the lack of knowledge or the moral innocence of an infant, child, or person who doesn't know the difference between good and evil. The expression refers to an inability to make moral judgments. That is how God views the wicked, evil, idolatrous citizenry of Nineveh. They are in the dark, blindly flailing around. They can't tell their right hand from their left, good from bad, right from wrong. They are in bondage.

This is the same perspective the apostle Paul has in Ephesians 2:1-3 when he talks about the population of the world without Christ. He reminds us as believers, "And you he made alive, when you were dead through the

trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." The Ninevites were children of wrath. They were held captive by supernatural evil.

Jonah is unable to think of the Ninevites this way, though. He sees them as the enemy, fully deserving of the worst that God can do to them. He is so engrossed in his self-pity that he has no pity to spare. And as the story comes to a close we see that Jonah needs God's mercy as much as or more than the Ninevites do. Jonah says he knows about God's mercy or pity in verse 2. Yet this prophet wants none of God's mercy if it means that he has to express it personally to the Gentiles. But the pity that Nineveh needs from God, Jonah needs even more because of his own pitilessness, judgmentalism, and petulant anger. He doesn't realize that he too is being judged by God, and the result is self-righteous anger. If Jonah could accept God's sovereign right to show pity on whomever he chose and would repent of his efforts to control God, this prophet could also receive the mercy, grace, and love of God that he so desperately needs.

A REPENTANT MAN

The book of Jonah ends very abruptly, without that crucial repentance from this unwilling prophet. What do you think happened to Jonah? I'm convinced that Jonah is the author of this book, that he wrote it purposefully to contrast his own constricted heart with God's open heart of love for the world. I'm convinced because of the insight revealed in the way he told the story that he finally did come to understand the heart of God.

When Mike Johnson was a pastor here he had a book on Vatican art with a number of photos of Michelangelo's paintings. On one of the walls in the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo has a painting called *The Prophets and Apostles*. He has tried to capture the faces of all the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. The art critics said in the text of the book that out of all the faces Michelangelo painted, none had a more radiant countenance than Jonah. Michelangelo was convinced that Jonah did accept God's merciful pity. Jonah became a communicator of grace to his own nation through his book and probably through his preaching as a prophet of God.

In conclusion, let me ask you to ask the Lord to apply this book very personally to your own heart through the Spirit. I heard somebody make the comment after the first week or two of our study, "I wish so-and-so had been here to hear that." We have to laugh because that's how we all are, isn't it? But who really needs to hear this? We do, of course.

I want to ask you to respond to some questions before the Lord. This book forces us to see our own power struggles with God. What has God called us to do that puts us into a contest of wills with him? What challenges to obedience in our inner spiritual transformation have set us running away? Where are we right now--in a Tarshish of escape or in a Nineveh of obedience? And what about the hard inner core of ego that has never been given over to God's control? Was our conversion a radical transformation from self-centered willfulness, or was it an effort to recruit God to help us accomplish our goals? Have the painful and difficult experiences of life broken the inner shell of proud individualism, or are we essentially the same people we always were? After the crises are past, are we any more flexible or any more willing to discern and do God's will?

Are there people we resist loving and caring for because their values, beliefs, or lifestyle contradicts ours? Who are our personal Ninevites, our enemies? Do they belong to religious cults? Are they secular humanists? Are they homosexuals? Are they people who stand for pro-choice and pro-abortion? Do they worship Mother Earth? Are they those who advocate a left-wing social agenda? Do they embrace New Age spirituality?

If the Lord said to arise and go to any one of those groups, would it be difficult to obey him? Do we ever get so committed to our predictions of what some people or groups deserve that we take on the responsibility in thought or action to program their punishment? Are there vestiges of Jonah's power struggle in us? For what do we need God's mercy, grace, and pity? And who in our lives needs God's merciful pity through us? Bishop Stephen Neal wrote: "The only reason for being a Christian is the ever-growing conviction that the Christian faith is true." This

happens when we meet Christ personally; when we experience his grace, his mercy, his pity. That is when our power base changes from our will to his will for us. The hard inner core of self-control is surrendered to his control. When we invite him to live in us we experience the power of his indwelling Spirit, and we can be free at last from our use of manipulative human power to evade his call. Our Lord Jesus not only shows us our Nineveh, but he gives us a continual flow of grace to share with the Ninevites. And this Jesus who is greater than Jonah will never leave us alone.

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