

Jonah, the Imperfect Prophet
(Jonah chapter 4)
Expository Lessons from the Book of Jonah

I. Review from the Previous Lessons

- a. This originally was intended to be a two-part series on the book of **Jonah**.
- b. The story of Jonah is particularly important to Christians because of the statement made by Jesus in **Matthew 12**.
 - i. “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.” (**Matthew 12:40-41**, NKJV)
- c. In the first lesson, **Jonah chapters 1-2**, we discussed the details in the story of Jonah and the Whale that foreshadowed the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus on the third day.
 - i. We also looked at the statement about Jesus being in the heart of the earth “three days and nights” as Jonah was in the belly of the whale for that period of time, and how this could be reconciled with the death and resurrection timeline as presented in the gospels.
- d. In the second lesson, we proceeded into **Jonah chapters 3-4** and discussed the preaching of Jonah in Nineveh and the remarkable repentance of the people of Nineveh, accompanied by prayer and fasting in sackcloth and ashes.
 - i. We also looked at the interesting parallels between the story of Jonah and the account of Jesus asleep in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and the events that followed (**Matthew 8:23-33**, **Mark 4:35-5:20** and **Luke 8:22-39**).
 - ii. We also discussed that while many preachers and teachers today are critical towards Jonah the prophet, we examined the case for considering him to be the greatest preacher of repentance in the Old Testament, based on what Jesus said in **Matthew 12**.
- e. However, while we had intended the series on **Jonah** to consist of just the first two lessons, a comment I received after the second lesson was that I had missed an important part of **Jonah chapter 4**.

- i. In the effort to address all the negative comments about the prophet from modern critics, I did not adequately address the weaknesses of the prophet, which become painfully evident in the last chapter. In fact, the story ends on a bit of a sour note, with the Lord rebuking the prophet!
- ii. Therefore, I was asked to address this omission by adding a segment to the lessons on Jonah that we had posted on our website. Based on other comments I received, we decided to turn this into a separate third lesson to what originally was intended to be a two-part series on **Jonah**.

II. Jonah, the Imperfect Prophet

- a. Jonah must have been an amazing preacher of repentance, bringing about something no other Old Testament preacher ever accomplished (bringing an entire corrupt pagan city to repentance in sackcloth and ashes). However, he also did have some shortcomings.
- b. Perhaps we can find some encouragement in the fact that many of the heroes of faith also had 'feet of clay', with sins and weaknesses in their character. For example, consider:
 - i. Noah (who got drunk)
 - ii. Abraham (who was deceitful out of fear regarding his wife)
 - iii. Jacob (who deceived his father)
 - iv. Moses (who struck the rock a second time, disobeying the Lord's instructions)
 - v. Aaron (envy)
 - vi. David (sin with Bathsheba)
 - vii. Solomon (a spiritual giant early in life, but corrupted by love for pagan women later in life)
 - viii. Hezekiah (pride late in life)
 - ix. Many others: Barak, Jephthah, Gideon, Samson, Elijah, etc.
- c. We certainly can learn from (and strive to imitate) the strengths of the heroes of faith. We also can learn from their weaknesses, which Satan exploited in an attempt to destroy them, in order to address similar weaknesses in ourselves!

- i. With that in mind, let us consider the weaknesses of Jonah, revealed in the last chapter of his story.

III. Nineveh is Spared Destruction, but Jonah Sulks

- a. Read **Jonah 3:8-4:11**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. The people of Nineveh fast, clothe themselves with sackcloth, repent and cry out to God for mercy.
 - ii. The Lord sees their actions and heeds their prayer. He spares the city from His planned destruction.
 - iii. Rather than being glad about this turn of events, Jonah is deeply grieved instead. He was looking forward to seeing the destruction of Nineveh by the Lord.
 1. He is so depressed that he wants to die, and he asks that the Lord take his life!
 - iv. Jonah builds a shelter and sits down in it, watching to see what will happen to the city of Nineveh.
 1. The Lord has a gourd plant spring up there, which provides Jonah with welcome shade from the heat.
 2. Jonah's mood shifts. Now he is very happy because of the shady plant.
 3. Then the Lord sends a worm to the plant, which withers up and dies.
 - v. After losing the plant and its shade, Jonah is suffering under the heat. He again becomes depressed and wants to die.
 - vi. The story closes with the Lord rebuking Jonah for having more pity for a wild gourd plant than for the entire city of Nineveh.
- c. **Question:** Taking everything we know about Jonah from all four chapters of this book, *what are his failings?*
 - i. First, Jonah appears to have some unfortunate tendencies which can quickly lead him into sin.
 1. He appears to be emotionally volatile, perhaps somewhat unstable and moody.

2. He easily gets hopelessly depressed when he is disappointed and despairs. He wants to give up on life and wishes he was dead.
- ii. Second, at the beginning of the story, Jonah rejects the Lord's call for him to go and preach to Nineveh. Instead, he attempts to flee from the presence of the Lord by sailing to Tarshish (**Jonah 1:1-3**).
 1. **Question:** What is the underlying sin of Jonah that provokes this disobedient response? Was it cowardice or lack of faith? Something else?
 - a. If I was in his situation, I would be tempted with *cowardice*. I would be afraid of the response I would receive in a foreign, pagan city when I called them all to repent.
 - b. However, that is not what Jonah says. **Read Jonah 4:1-2.**
 - i. I assume that what Jonah says here is 100% true since he tells the Lord, "Weren't these my words?" Also, Jonah showed himself to be brutally honest, even to his own destruction, in his interactions with the sailors on the boat.
 1. He admitted to them the storm was *all his fault*.
 2. He had told them he was *fleeing from the Lord*.
 3. He told them that the only way to save themselves from destruction was to *lift him up and cast him into the sea*.
 - c. Jonah says that back in Israel, when the Lord first approached him about this mission, he had told the Lord that he did not want to go *because he believed the Lord would relent and NOT destroy Nineveh*.
 - i. He tells the Lord, in effect: "Isn't this what I told you would happen? Weren't these my words back in Israel? Didn't I say that you were so merciful and compassionate that you would change your mind and not destroy them?"

2. Jonah clearly and accurately understood the character of God, specifically that the Lord is merciful, compassionate, slow to anger and quick to forgive. *HOWEVER*, Jonah *does not* have those characteristics in his own life! (And that does not appear to bother him, either.)
 - a. Jonah recalled the words about God's merciful character from **Psalm 103:8**. That passage reflected what Moses was told by the Lord in **Exodus 34:5-8**, when Moses had asked to see the face of God.
 - b. Jonah is NOT personally slow to anger, merciful, quick to forgive and spare judgment.
 - c. Jonah wanted to see Nineveh 'nuked' by the Lord.
 - i. Bear in mind that the Lord had singled out Nineveh for destruction because of the extraordinary wickedness of its people. The only other example of an extreme action like this is the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, in **Genesis 19**.
 - d. Jonah seems to have a strong sense of justice. He wanted to see the Ninevites *get the punishment they deserved* for their prior wickedness.

IV. Seeking Justice, Lacking Mercy

- a. Many times throughout history, God's people have had a much stronger sense of righteousness and justice (wanting to see the wicked get the punishment they deserve) than mercy (happy to forgive others when they repent).
 - i. Read **Ezekiel 18:27-33** and **33:14-20**.
 1. Religious people, who were devoted to living righteous lives, struggled with this merciful aspect of God's character. To them, it seemed unfair, as if someone who has lived in wickedness (but repented at the end) is 'getting away with something' if the punishment is withheld.
 2. We see the nature of God, being willing to extend mercy and grace to those who repent in the Old Testament (not just in the New Testament).

- b. This was not just a problem for the Pharisees. Jesus had to teach a great deal about this: not only that God is abounding in mercy, but that His followers need to be as well.
 - i. Read **Luke 9:51-56**.
 1. Jesus' disciples allude to what God did through Elijah in a story found in **2 Kings 1** and suggest that they also should call down fire from heaven to punish their opponents.
 2. They wanted to see justice done and the wicked punished. Jesus had other thoughts.
 - ii. In **Luke 15**, Jesus tells three parables to illustrate God's character in this.
 1. **Luke 15:1-7** - Parable of the Lost Sheep
 2. **Luke 15:8-10** - Parable of the Lost Coin
 - a. "And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!' Likewise, I say to you, there is *joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*" (**Luke 15:9-10**, NKJV)
 - b. Consider: Jonah was sulking while *the angels in heaven would have been rejoicing* at the repentance of the Ninevites!
 3. **Luke 15:11-32** - Parable of Prodigal Son
 - a. The good son protests to his father, "...Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time... But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him." (**Luke 15:29-30**, NKJV)
 - b. His father responded: "...Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found." (**Luke 15:31-32**, NKJV)
 - c. The first son in the story of the Prodigal Son was a righteous man. He always followed his father's commandments, and the father affirmed: "You are

always with me, and all I have is yours”. So let us not look down on him, as so many people do. He was, in fact, a righteous person. However, he lacked the mercy of the father. This is a common human tendency (wanting justice, rather than extending mercy), especially among those who are striving to live according to all of God’s commands.

- c. **The Challenge for Us:** Don’t fall into the trap that caught Jonah (and has snared many other good people).
 - i. We need to not only see God as “merciful, longsuffering, compassionate, willing to forgive...”, etc.
 - ii. We need to have those characteristics ourselves.
 - iii. We need to be rejoicing when the angels are rejoicing (when the wicked repent and are spared), rather than sulking like Jonah.
 - iv. It is not bad to want justice. God will ultimately bring about justice. Vengeance is the Lord’s. (**Romans 12:19, Hebrews 10:30**)
 - v. However, as those who are striving to live according to righteousness, we should never want anyone to perish, but want all to repent and be forgiven.

V. More Pity for a Wild Plant than for 120,000 Souls

- a. The book ends with the Lord rebuking Jonah.
 - i. “You took pity on the gourd...shall I not Myself take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which dwell more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand or their left...?” (**Jonah 4:10-11**)
- b. **Question:** What was Jonah’s underlying sin here?
 - i. Jonah became emotionally attached to a wild plant that gave him shade and comfort. He loved the plant.
 - ii. Sadly, he was more upset about the demise of this wild plant than he was about 120,000 human beings. He took pity on the plant and mourned the loss of the plant after a worm killed it. Whereas, God took pity on the entire city of Nineveh.
 - 1. The phrase, “who don’t know right from left” might mean that the people of Nineveh were spiritually ignorant (using a figure of speech). However, it might be referring to the children of that city (who would be innocent and have perished had the

Lord destroyed the city), who literally could not tell their right hand from their left hand.

2. "And also the livestock..."
- iii. **Question:** Can you imagine someone being so small-minded that they had more pity on a dead plant than they would have on thousands of people?
- c. Before we take up stones to stone Jonah, please let us consider *our own lives*.
 - i. He was more concerned about his own comfort than about the lives of thousands of others.
 - ii. He had more pity and compassion for a wild gourd plant than for human beings.
 - iii. **Question:** Why isn't the world being evangelized for Christ today?
 1. Christians are more emotionally invested in, and have more pity for, inanimate things than in the souls of thousands of human beings who are strangers.
 2. Many Christians care more about things like:
 - a. Homes
 - b. Gardens
 - c. Cars
 - d. Pets
 - e. Hobbies
 - f. Career/job, etc.
 - g. THAN THEY ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE SOULS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE IN OTHER LANDS (or even in their home country)!
 3. They are more concerned about things that provide them with personal comfort than they are concerned about lost human souls.
 - a. At least Jonah preached a warning message of God's impending judgment to them. What about you?

VI. Closing Thoughts

- a. Jesus was greater than Jonah, as Jesus Himself said in **Matthew 12**.
 - i. He combined powerful preaching on repentance and judgment (even greater than Jonah) with the mercy of His Father (unlike Jonah).
 - ii. Jesus (and the angels) rejoice when even the most wicked repent.
 - iii. Jesus cared more about the souls of men than his own comfort. He was not attached to “the deceitfulness of wealth and desire for other things” (**Mark 4:19**).
- b. Let us learn from Jonah’s strengths as well as *from his shortcomings*. May we imitate Jesus, who was even greater than Jonah in so many ways!