

Jonah Part 2 – “*Slow to Learn*” – October 1, 2023

This week, we move into the final chapter of Jonah, expanding on God’s amazing grace and sovereignty as king and lawgiver of the universe. I ended last week mentioning God’s attributes, and today, we will see God’s work of compassion even amid the “pouting prophet” Jonah. Jonah’s boo-hoo and woe is me turn into displeasure and anger. But as we will see, Chapter 4 confronts each of us with an incredible truth and a haunting question we cannot escape: lost people matter to God. Do lost people matter to us? Do we long for conversion and salvation of the lost like God, or are we, like Jonah, slow to learn about God’s sovereign majesty and everlasting mercy?

Jonah finds an ugly picture of himself when he is forced to look at himself in the mirror. More concerned with his life of comfort, the mirror reflects a self-centered and uncompassionate person toward the lost. As God’s people, how can we mirror his limitless love toward others who need to hear the life-changing gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? I know there are many questions to ponder. So, before we dig into this last chapter of Jonah while thinking never to forget who God is and what he wants us to learn, let us pause here to pray.

Holy God, we want to know you more and to love you better. It is the yearning of our hearts to learn more about you and to grow closer with each passing day. We ask for your wisdom and understanding for spiritual discernment and for your word to direct us on the right path. Guard us from false teachings and incorrect understanding of your nature and will. In this, we pray, Amen.

Why is Jonah so angry? The opening verse of chapter 4 reveals the character of Jonah in direct contrast to the general expectation of a prophet. Seeing 120,000 Assyrians repenting and turning to God, Jonah finds himself not rejoicing but enraged. As a prophet and an Israelite, this is not good, for we know from Jewish history that every Israelite must condemn such conduct, pronouncing judgment upon themselves. It should be a dream for a prophet to go and preach eight words. I would have it made on Sunday mornings if all I had to preach were eight words! Show up, preach eight words, save Cumberland County from darkness, and go home. That would be a cause for celebration. With all the insanity happening in this nation, that would be a dream come true. I wish, but the reality is people cannot find it within themselves to repent and get along with others.

On the surface, Jonah is afraid to face Nineveh. Pulling the curtain back, we see a wavering spiritual battle testing Jonah’s heart. Why is he angry? Because God is compassionate in extending the gift of repentance toward the people he hates. The whole story confirms that characterization. At the beginning of Chapter 3, God does not give Jonah the scolding he deserves for his previous disobedience and attempt at running away. Instead, God gives him another chance. Should we not do the same to those who we offended by? God does not immediately bring judgment upon the sinner. The message to the Ninevites is to give them forty days to repent of their evil. The story reflects that the Ninevites turned around and believed in God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. A sackcloth was a garment worn as an outward sign of mourning and repentance. When God saw

what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. Then, in chapter 4, Jonah's anger at God and his apparent irreverence brings only the mildest questions from the Lord of the universe. How do we feel when we see God decide to pour out his salvation and mercy upon others that make us angry? Maybe not so much as to die like Jonah. That's how angry he is when he says, "Just kill me." That's the background of the text we will consider. Are we, like Jonah, slow to learn how we of faith should model the same forgiveness and mercy with all people? Let us consider three modern-day lessons to learn from Jonah's life and apply three lessons to live in harmony according to God's will.

- 1) Angry people quit serving God and others.
- 2) Angry people separate themselves from God and others.
- 3) Angry people become spectators to God's will.

Is it right for you to be angry? We should ask ourselves this question if we find ourselves unforgiving with God and others. Yes, we find Jonah was angry towards God, and God allows us to state our anger towards Him, but like Jonah, we must also repent of our anger instead of quitting on God. What I find so disheartening is how we lose focus on why we come to church, which ends in anger toward God because our will comes before God's. What a disservice. We lose focus on God's will for us, his people, to carry out his mission. Have any of you been angry with someone? Have any of you been angry with God because your will has been in contrast with the intention of God?

In verses 5-8, God prepares an object lesson for Jonah. Jonah went out of the city hoping that the repentance of Nineveh was not enough to hold back God's judgment and that he would see the city destroyed after all. He went out of the town for safety. Is that what we do, look for safety, waiting for God to judge people because of hard-headed prejudice? What is the object lesson for us when we are slow to learn? Remember, God has compassion for other people even when all we care about is our petty selfishness. God's mission is to offer a chance at repentance, extending love and forgiveness to everyone.

Secondly, we separate ourselves from others by quitting and walking away. God comes to us while we are still sinners, and the Lord does not wait for us to "clean up our act" before He comes into our lives. If that were so, we would never be saved. God begins to have mercy upon us while we are still in willful disobedience, like Nineveh, characterized by infamous sin and evil. Jonah shows us that God's love is more significant than our self-interest. Jonah ran from God not merely because he feared God but because he did not want to bring the good news of God's grace to his enemies. The issue in the book of Jonah causes us to reflect on this truth: those who curse, not only God but our enemies, could be those who preach Christ tomorrow. The apostle Paul is a prime example.

Lastly, angry people become pouting spectators, running away to hide in the shade. God uses all means to extend his grace to all people. How much more will God use all things to reach the trials and troubles within the church? How much more will God hear your prayers as you cry out? God says, "suck it up, buttercup." In the book of Romans, Paul writes, consider it all joy when encountering various trials. When trials come, when trouble comes, God is always more

concerned with our character than He is with our comfort. Maybe, like Jonah, we need some attitude adjustment. Maybe a change of heart. Are you learning? Can you hear what God is trying to teach you? God is in charge, not you. Here is the question. Do you only love God when things are going well? Consider it all joy, brothers, and sisters, when you encounter various trials.

God is at work in us. He is not finished with us yet. He wants us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. He wants us to change the way we think about things. God knows how to deal with unrepentant sinners. How can we know if we are being changed and that God is at work in our lives? We know that we are being changed when we start loving the things God loves; we start acting like God acts, forgiving with compassion. God is the potter, and we are the clay.

God loves people, and he loves the people in Shippensburg. He loves the people in whatever town we choose. God has always been concerned about people. Nineveh is your neighbor next door, the bank teller, the person next to you in the grocery store, the person sitting next to you. The people you see driving down the road. Nineveh is the person "that you should have known better." Nineveh is everyone, everyone around you, your friends and your foes, even though you may not like them.

As I head down the stretch this morning, God sent Jonah to Nineveh in order that it might be saved. As far as I know - there was no plan "B." Jonah was to go to Nineveh and preach there. We are not told what happened to Jonah. The author is not concerned with him but with his readers. He asks: What does this mean to you in your day of hatred, prejudices, and fears? Can any of us resist this loving, gracious God? Can we resist the God who has revealed himself, on the highest level possible for our poor minds, in Christ? We have our own problems; "gentle people of prejudice." We are all slow to learn that we live in a world where if we save ourselves, we must also save others, and if we do not save others, we cannot save ourselves.

God always uses people to save people. Was Jonah reluctant? Was Jonah rebellious? Was Jonah stubborn? Yes, he was - but God got his attention. After spending three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish - Jonah went. You see - God's plan for saving people always involves people. There is no plan "B". Jonah was told to go to Nineveh - eventually, he went. Eventually, he did what God asked him to do.

Let me ask you - is God calling you to do something? Have you ever been reluctant? Have you ever been rebellious? Have you ever been stubborn? I know I have. But God has a way to get my attention. What will God have to do to get your attention? What will God have to do to get you to obey him? Why in the world can't we obey Him without all the drama?

We should pray:

"Lord, help us to pay attention to You. Lord, make us obedient servants. Lord, help us to stop running to Tarshish. Lord, help us to be a part of Your plan for this world. Help us to be faithful servants. Help us to be witnesses for You. Help us to tell others of Your love. Lord, please don't send a great fish our way." Help us to become willing partners in your plan. Amen.