

See Jonah Faint

The Prodigal Prophet – Part VII

Jonah 4:1-11

Introduction

Having studied this little journal called Jonah together with you, I am convinced that Jonah would rather have ended with chapter 3. In fact, had the book of Jonah ended at chapter 3, he would have gone down in history and been honored, even to this day, as the greatest evangelist and prophet to have ever lived.

In forty days of preaching, an entire nation had repented and followed after God. And not just any nation – it was the dreaded Ninevites, whose cruelty and idolatry were known all around the ancient world. If you can believe it – and Jonah’s world would be shocked by the news – from the king to the commoner, they all repented in faith and threw themselves on the mercy of God.

This was amazing! Had Jonah lived today, and this had happened to some nation of people –

- he would be front page news for months;
- he would be sought out for advice on every Christian subject;
- evangelists and pastors everywhere would be paying any price for the sermon outlines he preached;
- he would be interviewed by even the secular media for changing an entire culture through the preaching of God’s word – which is still, by the way, God’s method for influencing and redeeming the culture;
- revivals would be springing up all around the world, following his methods, and banners

outside tent crusades would promise, “Revival Like Nineveh – Here This Week”;

- books would be produced with titles like, “Effective Sermons for Effective Evangelists,” or “How to Preach Like Jonah Without Swimming With the Fishes,” or “Strategies for Reaching the Unreachable,” or “How to Win a City in Forty Days or Less” – and they would be flying off the shelves as Jonah began his bus tour instructing believers throughout the Mediterranean region on how to plant churches in former pagan temples.

Had this happened today –

- there would be invitations for Jonah to appear on television and radio to tell the behind-the-scenes story;
- there would be featured articles detailing his closed-door meetings with the king of Nineveh and his state dinners with the hoi polloi of Assyria;
- he would, no doubt, be voted *Time Magazine’s* Man of the Year and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize;
- roads would be renamed “The Prophet Jonah Boulevard” in downtown Samaria;
- busses would deliver tourists to Jonah’s hometown of Gath Hopher, where miniature whales would be on sale with little plastic men halfway in their mouths;
- shops would be selling bathing suits with Jonah’s picture all over them;

- there would be two places in Joppa where statues of Jonah would be dedicated – one with a bronze plaque saying, “Jonah got on the boat here,” and the other marking the spot with a plaque saying, “Jonah landed on the ground here,” and there would be a small dent in the ground where he landed;
- Christian bookstores would have life-sized cardboard cutouts of Jonah, so everyone could take their picture standing beside the greatest humble servant there ever was.

Think of the possibilities!

Evidently this did not happen in the American church.

Fortunately, none of this can happen because, unfortunately for Jonah, there is one chapter left in this book. As far as Jonah is concerned, this little book has one chapter too many.

Actually, it is just like God to record the rest of the story – the part of the story that will protect Jonah from becoming a celebrity for centuries to come. It will instead, keep him in the category of a normal clay pot that God used in spite of himself, so that all of us can glory, not in Jonah, but in Jonah’s God.

The truth is that the church today is far too quick to make superstars out of saints. The church today has too many celebrities and not enough clay pots.

For this and other reasons, I believe the final chapter is the most critical one of all. It is most needed because in it, God will ask some penetrating questions that every one of us needs to answer for ourselves.

In this chapter, Jonah will be asked three questions by God:

- the first question has to do with perspective;
- the second question has to do with priorities;
- the third question has to do with passion.

Jonah’s Misdirected Perspective

Let us begin by looking at Jonah 3:10-4:1.

When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.

If you have never read the biography of Jonah before, Jonah’s reaction will come as a shocking surprise.

Can you imagine someone preaching a forty-day tent meeting in which everyone is converted and yet, he goes home angry because, “Would you believe it, everybody got saved?! I’ve never been so disgusted in all my life.”?

Of course you cannot imagine this! We would expect Jonah to break out in praise to God and say, “Praise God, every lost person has been saved!”

However, this is the very thing that caused Jonah to run from God in the first place.

I will let Jonah explain for himself. Look at Jonah 4:2.

He prayed to the Lord and said, “Please, Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.”

In other words, Jonah had run from Nineveh in the first place, not because he was afraid no one would listen, but because he was afraid everyone would.

Jonah hated the Ninevites as much as Ninevites hated the Jews. They were the enemy of his people.

Jonah is a super patriot – a defender of Israel and Israel’s belief that they have sole ownership of Yahweh.ⁱ

I agree with Warren Wiersbe who wrote, “Jonah’s Jewish friends back home would want to see all of the Assyrians destroyed, not just the people of Nineveh. When Jonah’s friends found out that he had been the means of saving Nineveh from God’s wrath, they could have considered him a traitor to official Jewish foreign policy.”ⁱⁱ

It is no wonder that Jonah prays, in verse 3,

“Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.”

If you can imagine, Jonah would rather die than not be able to get his own way!

One author said, “Jonah prayed his best prayer in the worst place, the fish’s belly; and he prayed his worst prayer in the best place, at the great awakening in Nineveh. His first prayer came from a broken heart and his second prayer came from an angry heart.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, God suddenly asks Jonah a question that we are allowed to hear, in verse 4.

. . . ***“Do you have a good reason to be angry?”***

This is a question of perspective.

“Jonah, we’re looking at the same awakening. I’m glad and the hosts of heaven are rejoicing, but you’re growing madder by the minute.”

Jesus Christ looked at the city of Jerusalem and wept (Luke 19:41). Paul walked around the city of Athens, where the streets were filled, historians said, with more statues of gods than people, and he was filled with alarm for their souls (Acts 17:16). Jonah looked at the city of Nineveh and got angry that God had shown them mercy.

God basically says, “Listen, Jonah, we’re looking at the same situation, yet we have two different perspectives. Which one do you think is reasonable?”

Did you notice all the great theology Jonah laid out in verse 2? He said, “Lord, I know a lot about You. I know You are gracious, compassionate, long-suffering, kind, and merciful.”

However, this did not affect Jonah’s perspective.

This certainly did not affect his emotions. Jonah just did not want truth to control his life.^{iv}

Jonah could quote the truth; he just did not want to live it.

Can you imagine someone coming to faith in Christ and then, you mutter under your breath, “Oh no, not him/her. Man, I hope it doesn’t stick!”?

This is exactly what Jonah does next, in verse 5.

Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.

Were there no places to stay in the city of Nineveh? Of course there were – the king’s own palace would have been a wonderful retreat.^v

Jonah, however, did not hang around Ninevites – even converted ones. They were not his kind of people.

There is more to this than prejudice, however, as there is the element of self protection.

Jonah is far enough away from the city so that when the fire of God’s judgment falls, it will not scorch him. The word Jonah used to warn the Ninevites, in chapter 3, verse 4, “overthrown,” is the same word that is used for Sodom and Gomorrah

being overthrown by God. Jonah wants to be at a safe distance away.

Even more than this, however, Jonah is hoping it will come; in fact, he is counting on it. Jonah is hoping for a national relapse. I expect fire to fall under the bush where Jonah is sitting.

Jonah is hoping the Ninevites will go back to idolatry and on the forty-first day, as promised, the judgment of God will fall and turn Nineveh into a pile of ashes.

Now watch as God sets up the next penetrating question for Jonah, the prodigal prophet, who, by the way, in this text, is acting more like the prodigal’s older brother who is incensed that his younger brother has returned and is being treated with kindness and mercy by their father.

Look at Jonah 4:6.

So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.

This is the first time in this journal that Jonah has something that he is happy about.^{vi}

Notice, however, the way God is setting the stage, in verse 7.

But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered.

The word “worm” refers to a fruit grub, which gnaws on the roots of vines and plants. It attacked this particular plant under divine orders.

We cannot help but notice that God has appointed a great fish, a plant, and a worm, and they all obeyed His command.

Everything in this book obeys God, but Jonah. Everything responds to God’s command – the storm, the great fish swallowing Jonah and then spitting him up, the plant, the worm, and do not forget the Ninevites, and even the wind.

Notice verse 8a, and note the same word “appointed” again.

When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind . . .

This “east wind” is literally a “sirocco,” which is a hot, dust storm that can last for days at a time. Continue to verses 8b-9.

. . . and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint [literally fainted away and revived] and begged with all his

soul to die, saying, “Death is better to me than life.”

Then God said to Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “I have good reason to be angry, even to death.”

The first question exposed a misdirected perspective. Let us look at this second question.

Jonah’s Mistaken Priority

The second question, in Jonah 4:9, exposed a mistaken priority.

. . . “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?”

Frankly, a test of priority is simply this – “What do I get excited about and what do I get mad about?”

In other words, “What turns my engine and what churns my engine?”

Jonah’s difficulty in life was actually the result of his own selfish anger. He could have been in the palace, away from the sun, away from the dust storm, sipping Assyrian sweet tea, but no, not Jonah. Jonah’s attitude is, “I want the Ninevites wiped off the face of the earth.”

Jonah may have preached the message of God that led to a national awakening, but Jonah himself is in need of reviving.

Jonah moved from *anger*, in verse 1, to *happiness*, in verse 6.

Jonah is angry over the conversion of sinners and happy about the creation of a plant.^{vii}

This is a problem of priority.

Ladies and gentlemen, what makes us happy and what makes us angry reveal more about our priorities than we would really like to know.

You might say, “I can’t believe Jonah really got more upset over the condition of a plant than the condition of people.”

He did.

Not us!

Oh? Do you not think people care more about their shrubbery than they do people? Ask the average church member how much time they spend on their lawn compared to reaching the lost. Find out how much more time they focus on feathering their nest than on winning their world.

What do we really care about? What are our real priorities?

I was listening today to an interview with a *Washington Post* reporter. He said that it seems obvious from polls that even those who say they do not believe in the use of abortion to terminate a baby’s life are voting for a candidate who supports abortion even up to the time of delivery. Why? “Because,” this man said in a rather chilling admission, “even those who care about abortion evidently do not care about it as much as they do their own personal economy.”

Jonah cares more about his own personal comfort than he does people’s lives. He would fit nicely into the American culture of the twenty-first century.

Notice verses 10-11.

Then the Lord said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.

“Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?”

The first question had to do with misdirected perspective. The second question had to do with mistaken priority. Now let us look at the final question.

Jonah’s Misguided Passion

The final question, in Jonah 4:11, has to do with misguided passion.

“Should I not have compassion on Nineveh...?”

In other words, “Should I not be moved to pity and mercy? Should I not be moved on their behalf?”

Jonah had to learn the difference between what is perishable and what is permanent.

Frankly, everything on this planet is in the process of perishing, except in the spiritual realm of God’s glory and the lives of people.^{viii}

Notice what God points out to Jonah about the Ninevites, in verse 11.

“. . . there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know . . . their right hand [from their] left . . .”

Some Bible scholars believe this is a reference to children who have not learned the difference between their right and left hands. This could be the case – perhaps God is pointing out that His judgment will take the lives of 120,000 children.

I, on the other hand, believe that this is a reference to the people who live within the city walls, which is not counting the outlying suburbs where another 500,000 people live.

God is saying, "Listen, Jonah, these people are utterly confused in their idolatry. They can't even figure out the difference between their left hand and their right hand."

What does God mean by this?

In the Bible, the left hand is the place of ruin or spiritual blindness.

Jesus Christ said that,

He will put [His] sheep on His right [hand], and the goats on His left [hand]. (Matthew 25:33)

Christ is said to have ascended to,

. . . the right hand of God. (Mark 16:19b)

Galatians 2:9 speaks of,

. . . the right hand of fellowship.

In Psalm 73:23, David rejoiced, saying,

. . . I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand.

The right hand stands for that which is good and effective, and the left hand stands for moral compromise and coming judgment.

God is basically saying to Jonah, "These people are so confused they do not even get right from wrong. They have no moral parameters; they're wandering around without moral guidance, doing whatever they think makes sense – and they're entirely confused."

Solomon wrote it this way, in Ecclesiastes 10:2,

A wise man's heart directs him toward the right, but a foolish man's heart directs him toward the left.

Imagine, going back centuries, there was the use of the right and the left side or position in life.

It is really interesting to be dealing with this on the eve of an election.

People ask me, "Who are you going to vote for? Are you going to say something?"

I will not endorse a candidate, but I will read a verse of scripture, "The wise moves to the right and a fool moves to the left."

This says it all! This is my pre-election speech.

However, do we not care about those who are wandering and lost?

"Jonah, should I not have compassion on all these people and all their livestock?"

We are not given Jonah's answer. I would like to think it was the right answer – and Jonah packed up his stuff and headed back to Nineveh to do some discipleship training.

There seems to be evidence that this happened. In fact, the area around Mosul was known for centuries as Jonah's Hill. Furthermore, Assyrian Christians living in Mosul today – the place of ancient Nineveh – still relate their salvation back to the coming of Jonah to their forefathers. And, they are extremely grateful to this day that Jonah came, preaching the gospel of God.

Conclusion

Now, before we wrap up our study, I must quickly refer to One who is greater than Jonah.

In Matthew 12:41, our Lord said,

"The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, [One] greater than Jonah is here."

Jesus is greater than Jonah. The Ninevites repented at the preaching of Jonah, but Jerusalem would not repent at the preaching of Jesus, who was far greater than Jonah.

How is Jesus greater than Jonah? Both were Jews and both were prophets.

- Jonah was a man; Jesus was the God-man (John 1).
- Jonah preached a message of judgment; Jesus preached a message of repentance and salvation (John 3).
- Jonah almost died for his own sins; Jesus willingly died for the sins of the world (I John 2).
- Jonah's ministry was to one city; Jesus Christ's message will circle the globe (Revelation 19).
- Jonah's obedience was not from the heart; Jesus always did what pleased His Father (John 8).
- Jonah did not love the people he came to rescue; Jesus had compassion for the lost and came to seek and to save them (Luke 19).
- Jonah waited outside the city, hoping God would not forgive those who had hated the

Jews; Jesus Christ was put on a cross outside the city, praying that His Father would forgive those who hated Him (Luke 23).^{ix}

Jesus Christ is greater than Jonah in a million more ways. This gives us all the more reason to follow Him.

So this book ends with a question for Jonah – several questions, in fact. They are questions of perspective, priority, and passion.

We cannot answer for Jonah, but we can answer for ourselves. Let us give God the right answer; let us obey Him like the wind, the waves, the fish, the plant, the worm, and the Ninevites. Let us answer,

“Command away! Here am I – use me, mold me, send me. I do not want to be a prodigal, and I do not want to be the prodigal’s older brother either. Lord, just let me obey You like the worm, and the fish, and that will be enough for me.”

Now, as we leave this journal of a prodigal prophet, the hero of the story is clearly not Jonah – and it will never be you or me. There is no need for Jonah’s autograph or photograph.

The hero is our gracious, compassionate, long-suffering, loving, and merciful God. To Him be praise and honor and glory forever and ever, amen.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/2/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ William L. Banks, Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet (Moody Press, 1966), p. 105.

ⁱⁱ Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Amazed (Victor Books, 1996), p. 88.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 89.

^{iv} Howard Hendrix, “Jonah: The Pouting Prophet,” p. 1, <http://discipleshiplibrary.com>.

^v James Montgomery Boice, The Minor Prophets (Baker, 1983), p. 308.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 308.

^{vii} Hendricks, p. 2.

^{viii} Hendricks, p. 3.

^{ix} Wiersbe, p. 93.