

An Exhortation on Repentance

“Give Me Justice Or Give Me Death”

Jonah 3:1-4:4

With Study Questions

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Jonah 3:1-4:4

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

3:1 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The People of Nineveh Repent

6 The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, 8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Jonah's Anger and the Lord's Compassion

4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 2 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. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4 And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

Introduction

Food network has a show called Chopped. Have you seen it? Rachel and I have seen some episodes this summer. Four chefs compete and have to open a mystery basket containing scary ingredients that they then convert with very limited time into into an appetizer, dinner and dessert.

One of the episodes in the opening season the chefs were given watermelon, canned sardines, pepper-jack cheese and zucchini and told to transform this into an appetizer!

Four judges try meals with these strange combinations, deliberate and then tell Ted Allen, the host, what they've decided. The contestant chefs come back out and Allen declares who has been chopped. The interesting thing - and the reason I am giving this introduction - is the way Ted Allen eliminates contestants. "Chef" he says, "You've been chopped." Based on the food the chef has made a judgment is given. "You weren't good enough and so we have to chop you."

The game comes down to what you do. The proof is literally in the pudding... or whatever dessert you choose to make.

I think we often live that way towards God. If we live as good kids God will give us our reward. But if we displease him he is going to chop us. We think God should give us what we deserve. But I want to tell you, this morning, that is a scary request. And it's the request that Jonah makes of God. "Give me justice or give me death."

My message this morning is really a story. It comes in three movements. You could think of them like chapters.

First, The Ninevites' total repentance

Second, The LORD turns from destruction and Jonah asks to be destroyed.

Third, Jonah's three days in the fish and the sign of Jesus.

1: The Ninevites' Total Repentance

The Word of the Lord now comes to Jonah a second time. You remember that the first time this Word came, the first verses of the book of Jonah, he moved quickly in a very opposite direction from God's call. "Go to Nineveh" and Jonah boarded a boat headed for Tarshish. But Jonah has discovered from the belly of what may be called a sea monster (some enormous type of threatening fish) that even from "the belly of Sheol,"

(Jonah 2:2) God hears his voice. There is nowhere, not Tarshish or the belly of sea monsters where we can escape God's presence.

But the belly of death itself cannot contain Jonah when God's powerful word commands him to be vomited. It's a weird thought, saved from death through vomiting, but this is God's word.

But there is a contrast being set up between the first time Jonah was commanded to go and this time. Now Jonah rises up from a three-day encounter being threatened with death and he obeys.

The message that Jonah brings to Nineveh is simple: forty days and you will be destroyed. This destruction isn't a slap on the wrist. This is total decimation. Utter destruction. The earth will be turned over upon them. This is the same word used for what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. Turned upside down, burned with fire and planted with salt so nothing would live there ever again.

Now, how does God choose this amount of time? Why give them forty days? Is this an arbitrary period, given like the last meal a convicted murderer got before they were put in the electric chair? "Live your life however you want for forty days and then you will die." I think something else is happening here.

If you were an Israelite hearing this story you would be familiar with forty days. It means one thing. God is coming in the worst kind of judgment. Remember, forty days was the time it took in Noah's day for God to destroy the whole world when he opened the heavens and all but eight people on an Ark escaped. It rained for forty days and forty nights.

But what happens in our text in Jonah when the people of Nineveh are confronted with their impending doom?

Now to a Jewish person, here comes a massive surprise. They would be going through the story and expect something like, "The Ninevites rejected God's word and contentiously spited his prophet. They wagged their heads at him and taunted him." You know, Nineveh was one of the

greatest nations in the world. And here comes one puny prophet to tell them they will be destroyed? Pagans don't repent. It had not happened in Israel's history. Evil cities who are confronted with judgment had always mocked the messengers of God.

But instead we get city-wide repentance. The text makes every effort to show how totally comprehensive this turning from sin was.

Verse 6 sets up this wave of repentance through the city. The first crowd calls a fast it says, "from the greatest to the least." Nobody left out. But then news of this proclamation of God's judgment reaches the king and you expect him, the bastion of world power, to laugh at God. But he falls on his face instead.

The text reads as if he had a choice of clothing that day and he passed over all the extravagant clothes – all silk and expensive dress – and instead put on sackcloth and ground himself down into ashes.

All the jewels, robes, crowns and even the food is set aside. But it isn't enough just for him to repent. He makes a decree, backed up by the city officials, that no living creature (man, beast or even sheep) shall taste anything. No bread. No water. Now, you remember, that this is what was expected of Israelite kings. The son of David was called to lead the city in repentance and worship of God. And as went the king, so went the city. The kings that were righteous before God, led the people in the commandments of God. But the wicked kings, like Ahab and Manasseh led the people into dark idolatry and even killed God's messengers. But again, we get a surprise. This utterly pagan king falls down and dresses himself in true humility.

Transition: But the question is, will it be enough? What will happen to the citizens of Nineveh? Forty days and then awful judgment. What is going to happen?

2: The LORD Turns From Destruction and Jonah Asks to be Destroyed.

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.” Jonah 3:10

It seems too easy right? The citizens of Nineveh are practicing all kinds of evil. Their evil deeds were, “coming up before the LORD,” the beginning of Jonah says. But they repent for forty days and God turns his anger away from them? Why? Why did God not carry through the judgment he said he would? This is exactly the question that Jonah has. But this isn’t just curiosity for Jonah. “I wonder why God did it that way?” No, this response from God makes Jonah very angry.

As God is cooling down from his anger, Jonah isn’t following suit. He is hot, boiling over and ready to burst. Jonah’s response in chapter 4 verse one reads something like: “To Jonah this was evil, and he was greatly angry/disappointed and he burned with anger.” (My translation of Jonah 4:1) Jonah has put God’s actions in the scale and judged them to be evil.

He makes two telling statements: “I knew you were gracious like this,” and “I want to die.” I knew you wouldn’t actually punish them and if they don’t die, I want to die.

**“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.”
Jonah 4:2**

Now Jonah shows his cards. In chapter one, the text only told us that Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. That is why he wouldn’t go to Nineveh. But here, Jonah tells us a little bit more: “I knew you were gracious.” I wanted this city to be utterly turned upside down, sown with salt and never to give life again; and if they aren’t going to lose their lives, then take away mine. I hate this world ruled by a God that is merciful.

This type of hatred for the citizens of Nineveh is intense. But in order to understand this strong desire for justice that Jonah has you have to understand what the Ninevites had done.

You know that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians were brutal warriors. Here is a war bulletin from approximately 1000 BC:

A commander of Assyria boasts about his own accomplishments: "Asshur my Lord commanded me to go forth...I covered the regions of Saraush and of Ammaush with ruins...I proved myself against their armies at the mountain of Aruma, I chastised them, I strawed the earth with their bodies as [if] they had been beasts of the field; I took their cities in possession, I carried away their gods, I led them away captive, them and their goods and their treasures; I burned the cities with fire, I destroyed them, I made them even with the ground."¹ This Assyrian commander goes on to say that he killed two hundred and sixty fighting men and did horrendous things to them - things we can't say in front of children - to prove his strength over them.

Jonah says to this kind of people. "God, do to them what they have done to others." We should be able to relate to this desire for justice. Imagine watching plane after plane rocking into the world-trade center on September 11, 2001 and on September twelfth being called by God. "Pick yourself up and go to Afghanistan to preach for the repentance of Al Qaeda and Bin Laden." You might respond something like Jonah and say, "I don't know if I can do that."

But Jonah *seems* to be right in what he is saying. When God commanded Israel to go into Canaan and clear out the land he said:

"And you shall consume all the peoples that the Lord your God will give over to you. Your eye *shall not pity them*, neither shall you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you." (Deut. 7:16)

¹ Assyrian War Bulletin (1000BC) Cited from Iowa State University (<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~cford/342worldhistoryearly.html>) on July 19th 2013.

But now God is saying “we have to pity this great nation that has repented from their evil deeds.” And the question is, “Is Jonah right to say, Give me justice (over the Ninevites) or give me death!” The book of Jonah ends with this question. God asks, “*Isn't it right for me to pity such an enormous amount of people?*”

Now finishing a story with a question is like singing a song but not coming to resolution with the last note. Or it would be like watching Lord of the Rings: Return of the King right up to the scene where Sam and Frodo are hiking up what looks like a vertical slope to the place on mount doom where Frodo can finally throw the ring into the fire and be rid of it and the screen fades to black. Well? What happens? Or even worse, what about finishing the movie when Frodo got his finger bit off and is hanging over the fire. Will he make it out? That is the ending of Jonah.

The book of Jonah is part of the readings for some Jewish people at the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur. This question at the end of the book of Jonah is a silence so deafening that the Jewish commentary on the book changes the ending. After God asks the rhetorical questions: **“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?”** The Jewish commentary answers the question with this action: Then he (Jonah) fell on his face and said: "Conduct Your world according to the attribute of mercy, as it is written: 'To the LORD our God belong mercy and forgiveness' (Daniel 9:9)²

Jewish people acknowledge the tension of this ending and change it. The only problem? The text doesn't have this ending.

Transition: So is there an answer within the book of Jonah to this question? How can God be just and allow sinners to go unpunished?

3: Jonah's Three Days in the Fish and the Sign of Jesus

You know that Jonah was swallowed up by a large fish. This is the part of the story that all children will remember. What got him in the fish? Well

² Uriel Simon's "Jonah's Lesson in Divine Mercy." PDF on Fordham University's website: <http://faculty.fordham.edu/ajofriedman/2811-F07/readings/jonah-midrash-simon.pdf> Cited on July 20, 2013.

the men Jonah was with threw him into the sea. The book of Jonah would be over by chapter 1 verse 16 if it weren't for this fish. But God doesn't give to Jonah what he deserved. Jonah disobediently ran from God, was thrown into the water to drown and God rescued him. But Jesus interprets these three days of Jonah underwater and says it points to another three days.

“Just 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.” (Matthew 12:40)

What is so ironic about the story of Jonah is that the very one who would point forward to Jesus' perfect mercy was the one angriest about it. Jonah had experienced something like a death and a resurrection. He had been under the waters of judgment for three days in what he calls “the pit of Sheol” and then the word of the Lord comes to him and tells him: Arise. But as soon as he is walking the streets of Nineveh and preaching judgment he has forgotten God's mercy in his own story. He experienced the salvation and mercy of God for three days in the belly of a fish. Listen to his prayer of confession in the fish: “I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!” (Jonah 2:9). But he gets spit up and has another three-day experience in that great city of Nineveh and completely forgets how much he had been forgiven.

And this is exactly our problem and the call to repentance for us this morning. Many of us this morning have seen God's generous mercy in our lives. We knew we deserved God's wrath, we saw the love of Christ poured out for us in the cross but somehow, day-to-day, we turn towards our neighbor, our spouse, our children or parents and forgetfully say, “Give me what you owe me!” We are often like the man in Matthew 18 who - after being forgiven a debt that would have taken two-thousand lifetimes to repay - turns to one who owes him what was pennies compared to his debt and starts to choke and threaten him saying, “Pay me what you owe me.” You see the real tension in the book of Jonah is, “How could one who was forgiven so much, have so little mercy?” This book is about how Jonah relates to God's kindness. It begins with Jonah running from God and ends with Jonah angry at God - angry enough to die! - and

both running and anger are occasioned by God's mercy. "I knew you were a merciful God!"

But Jonah's anger at God's grace and our own forgetfulness are the reasons Jesus had to die. The story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection have very curious connections to the book of Jonah. Like the days of judgment on the whole world in Noah's day or the fasting and repentance of the Ninevites, Jesus was taken out into the desert and did not eat for forty days and nights. The Ninevites deserved this judgment but Jesus took it upon himself for sinners like us. Jonah was thrown into the waters to pacify God's anger but then rescued from them by a great fish. Jesus, on the cross, was plunged into the waters of God's wrath and was not rescued. Jonah didn't get what he deserved and neither did Jesus. Jonah was rescued even though he disobeyed. Jesus was punished always having obeyed. And this is the story we are living in also.

If we cry out with Jonah, "Give me justice!" we overlook and forget the cry that Jesus had from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus took all the brunt of God's justice so that mercy and righteousness could kiss. But he didn't die and stay in the grave. Like Jonah, Jesus conquered the grave on the third day and was vindicated. That is the answer and crescendo conclusion to the book of Jonah. "Shouldn't I have pity?" asks God? Yes! God is vindicated. Just - in that his anger was focused on Christ on the cross - but also the Justifier of those who look to Jesus in His resurrection.

Why did God overlook the sins of the Ninevites? God did not pour out his anger and judgment on the citizens of Nineveh so that later he could show His righteousness.

"This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had pass over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Romans 3:25-26

In conclusion: (1) We saw the total repentance of the Ninevites (2) We saw God's grace and Jonah's anger but (3) we saw that the story of the

Ninevites feeling disjointed because it was waiting for God's crescendo. The sign of Jonah and Jesus' three days in the heart of the earth before rising again on the third day.

Do we live in a world like the TV show *chopped* where people who sin have no opportunity for repentance? Do we just want God to be fair with us? Friends that is dangerous. God dealing with us as we deserve is the scariest request.

Christ has accomplished everything necessary for our justification. All those who repent and believe in Him will find life. Will we live in a world animated and run by the mercy of God? Or will we oppose the one who mercifully justifies and end with Jonah's plea to angrily die? Jesus is merciful enough to be a friend of sinners. Can we live with that? Can we live with a cross in a world that appears, for the time being, unfair?

Questions for Study

1. What would the 40-day period bring to mind for Israelites hearing this story read? (Page 5)
2. Why was the repentance of the Ninevites surprising? (Page 5)
3. How did God respond to their repentance and what did this cause in Jonah's heart? Why did Jonah respond this way? (Page 6-7)
4. Why does the ending of Jonah feel jarring? What happens when you end a story with a question? (Page 7-8)
5. What did Jonah's 3 days in the fish point forward to? Why should this have changed his view of the 3 days in Nineveh? (Page 8-9)
6. Why is it dangerous to ask God to give you what you deserve? How did Jesus take on himself what we deserved? (Page 10)
7. How is God both "Just and the Justifier?" (Page 10)