

We have seen that the book of Jonah is in 4 movements: **Chapter 1: Jonah and the Storm;**
Chapter 2
:
Jonah and the Fish;
Chapter 3
:
Jonah and the City;
Chapter 4
:
Jonah and the Lord.

One might think the story of Jonah would be over in chapter 3, when the great city repented in sackcloth and ashes before God. But that's not what this story is about. The book of Jonah is not just about a whale, rebellion, and repentance, but it focuses our attention on the very heart of God.

The supreme message of this book is the love and tenderness of God toward all people—even enemies.

3:10— *"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had **compassion** and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."*

Demonstrating God's compassion is the reason for this book. Jonah's reaction, however, was just the opposite (vv. 1-3). 1] *"But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.*
2] *He prayed to the LORD, 'O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*
3] *Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.*

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This statement gives us further insight into Jonah's initial disobedience. The fact was, he knew God and His character, so in order to avoid what God would do, he ran. Maybe he thought, *"If I can go to Tarshish, I can stop the whole plan.* He might have reasoned: *"If I hide out in Tarshish for a long time, maybe by then the Ninevites will be destroyed by the Babylonians or someone, and I can go back. After that, I know the Lord will forgive me and it will be O.K.*

” Amazingly, he tried to stop the will of God, to put it aside.

We have all discovered by studying chapter 3, however, that God does not change His mind or His character even when dealing with our enemies. We assume He loves us more than our enemies. But **God is consistent, loving, and forgiving, and will use a variety of means to see that all the people of the earth are reached!**

Never forget that!

When you read verses 2 and 3 from Jonah's perspective, it's almost ludicrous, because he really *complained* about God's perfect character. He recited a list of God's attributes, then said He is a God who relents from sending calamity. These themes are found throughout Scripture (Ex. 34:6; Ps. 103:6-11, etc.).

God is gracious—He will do things out of love for people, when it isn't merited. That's the way our God acts toward us.

God is compassionate—having pity and mercy. It is shown to anyone who has needs, without respect of persons, and is expressed in deeds. It is showing loving action toward those who deserve nothing, e.g., the good Samaritan—Luke 10.

Pastor Ron Ritchie tells the story of a man named Bobby, a member of a Vacaville, California prison ministry called Christian Fellowship, who is a guard at that prison. While working one day, he was brutally beaten by a convict and was out of work for six months due to his injuries. He convinced the warden of the prison, however, to allow him to go back as a full-time, unpaid Christian worker.

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He has subsequently led his attacker, now in solitary confinement, to the Lord. The prisoner now has a ministry to those in solitary. Bobby has a three-legged milking stool he slides from door to door, outside each cell. When he gets to the next door, he sits on the milking stool and puts his hands through the little opening in the door where food is put. He tells how the men in these cells grab his hand: their first contact with another human in months. His whole ministry is going from cell to cell, touching and sharing the gospel with men who have no other contact with humanity. Do you think these prisoners listen when Bobby tells them about Jesus Christ?

Ron Ritchie, Discovery Publishing #3557, Palo Alto, Calif., Feb. 5, 1978.

How do you think those whose lives have been hurt by these criminals would feel about Bobby's ministry? Maybe like Jonah did? As believers, we are different. We are to be like the psalmist in Ps. 103:6-14 and praise God for His compassion, i.e., His pity and mercy. *(Read it.)*

Many times our image of God is that of a celestial cop, constantly chasing and blowing the whistle on us, or hitting us with his nightstick. But that is an unscriptural picture of God. (Read 4:2.) He *longs* to show compassion to those He created.

God is “slow to anger”—long-suffering. How many of us are glad for that?

God is abounding in love—it is abundant and overflowing.

When I was growing up, my brother and I hated to do the dishes, so we had a plan. We would make such a mess that my mom would get frustrated and say, “Oh, get away from that sink, you're making too much of a mess.” One of the things we would do was to pour in too much soap...enough for about a thousand dishes...enough to overflow the sink. With no similarity to

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our motive, that's a great picture of how God's love abounds. It overflows any situation, fulfilling any need we might have.

God relents from sending calamity—He is willing to accept men and women who see where they have gone wrong and repent of their ways. Our God is willing to forgive us if we repent, and lets us start fresh as though we had never sinned. Though we deserve to die and are under the sentence of death, like Nineveh, if we turn, God relents. God forgives and forgets!

Even this angry prophet reported God's character accurately.

Comparing his attitude here with his attitude inside the fish/whale is revealing, exposing Jonah's inconsistent and self-serving theology of God. In chapter 2, Jonah was in peril, in the whale experiencing the logical consequences of his action, and yet **praised God for His salvation.**

(2:9—

"But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.

"

)

In chapters 3-4, however, the Ninevites were the ones in danger, and Jonah was angry. v. 3—*"Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."* Isn't it interesting that we rely on God's character when

we

are in trouble, but ignore it or even get angry when He comes through for our enemies

. We often have a self-serving theology!

Jonah actually asked God to end his life because He was/is merciful, but the Lord rebuked him in an interesting way. v. 4—"But the LORD replied, 'Have you any right to be angry?'" The Lord seems to emphasize the **you**. "Do **you** of all people, Jonah, have a right to be angry that I am a God of mercy, when you yourself have benefited so greatly from that mercy? **Mercy was all right for you, Jonah, but not for this important city?"**

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How soon we forget! We thank God for His forgiveness and help, and yet we sometimes are so unforgiving of others. Let's not be too hard on Jonah; as we reflect on his story, we may be looking in the mirror.

This understanding of God's grace can affect our ministry in every way. For example, before the apostle Paul became a believer, He through persecution caused the church to be scattered into the world, and may have been responsible for the capture and murder of believers. But after his conversion, he constantly referred to himself as one who needed grace and the chief among sinners—He didn't forget!

If we have the proper attitude, it eliminates hypocrisy and the “God get them” attitude—the Jonah spirit. **People with the Jonah spirit have bad memories!**

After that wise rebuke (v. 5), *“Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.”*

Contrast the atmosphere in Nineveh with Jonah's attitude in this scene. While Nineveh is praying for deliverance, Jonah is praying for destruction. It's true; Jonah hasn't left Nineveh because he is hoping for destruction, and has found a great seat to watch it all happen. But starting in verse 6, God begins to put together a wonderful object lesson for Jonah, one designed to get his attention and reveal what he is like and what God is like.

I think this is one of the most striking and beautiful pictures of God anywhere in Scripture.

God gets Jonah's attention by making him very glad. v. 6—*“Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.”*

God helps Jonah to be comfortable, through two very specific items (a vine and additional shade) prepared by the Lord for his education. He is aware of the comfort, but not of the education he is about to receive.

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Reflect:

God went to incredible lengths to communicate to Jonah. I'm sure God does the same and more for us today. In fact, it might be helpful to name some of His provisions/gifts to illustrate His mercy and love.

Jonah's attitude is clearly displayed again here. Judging by what made him angry and glad, Jonah's value standard is obvious. When he was taken care of and provided for, he was happy, but he didn't think others were deserving of God's good gifts as well. Likewise, we are really happy when things go our way. But if someone we hate makes it, we get really upright.

Doesn't Jonah's response remind you of the response of the prodigal son's brother? How is it different or similar? (Turn to Lk. 15:25-32.)

The object lesson continued at the next sunrise, when God prepared a worm, exposing Jonah again to the sun. v. 7—*"But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered."*

Can't you see this little worm doing its own thing when God says, "Hey little worm, I need your services. Worm, I appoint you to go over to that plant and have yourself one big feast. Don't stop eating until the plant withers." I can hear the worm say: "Whatever you say, boss." So the worm crawls over, eats his fill, crawls back and says, "I did exactly what you asked." I can then hear God saying, "I wish I could get Jonah to do what I say."

The worm accomplished its mission. So as the sun beat down and the wind blew on Jonah, what was his reaction to the destruction of the vine? v. 8—*"When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, 'It would be better for me to die than to live.'"*

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This object lesson was now getting to Jonah. But there was no help, no salve from God, only the same type of stinging question that God asked before: v. 9—“But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?’ ‘I do,’ he said. ‘I am angry enough to die.’”

This is called by Ron Ritchie, “**biblical thumbsucking.**” We do it when God doesn't come through like we think He should, or we don't get our own way. We say, “What's the use. If God doesn't come through like I think He should, I can't go on. This is not the way I planned on it working out, therefore I want out of here.”

Most of us struggle with this from time to time:

- Our children don't turn out like we thought they should
- Our health isn't what we imagined it would be or should be
- Our marriage has a few glitches, some struggles we didn't plan on.
- Our jobs aren't satisfying, or what we prayed for.
- Our university/college life is not as fun as we thought it would be, because there are relationships to work out, finances, unreal expectations from teachers, etc.

So we get angry at God, and say, “I'd rather give up this Christian life. I quit! What's the use? I would rather die.”

Jonah's response was in reality the forming of a fist in God's face, but his anger really failed to ruffle God's patient instruction; God can handle our anger. Jonah's work was done, but the Lord was not through with him yet; nor was He finished with the original reader; nor with us. Although God was not responsible for or answerable to Jonah, He took great pains to teach Jonah and us about His compassion. These were His lessons:

Unlike Jonah and the plant, God loves His creation and has something invested in it. 10] *But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you **did not tend***

it

or
make it grow

. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.”

Unlike the plant that made Jonah happy and unhappy, God loves people whether they make Him happy or not. 11] *“But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”*

God was cultivating the object lesson even further. Essentially, He put His arm around Jonah and said, “Jonah, think about what you're saying. Let me give you a little perspective on what has just happened to you. It has all been designed to teach you something about Me, yourself and others.”

One author paraphrased the conversation this way: “What did it (this plant) really mean to you? Your attachment to it could not be very deep, for it was here one day and gone the next. Your concern was dictated by self-interest, not by a genuine love. You never had for it the devotion of the gardener. If you feel as badly as you do, what would you expect a gardener to feel like, who tended a plant and watched it grow only to see it wither and die. . . ? And this is how I feel about Nineveh, only much more so. All those people, all those animals—I made them, I have cherished them all these years. Ninevah has cost me no end of effort, and they mean the world to me. Your pain is nothing to mine when I contemplate their destruction”—Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, and Micah*, p. 234.

Do you catch the majesty of these verses? We are hearing in them the very heart of God. So the next time you think God has had it with you (or your enemies, family and/or friends), or that He has given up, remember the words of vv. 10-11.

Conclusion

The first and most important reason for the writing of this book is that we might see

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God. Once this point has been reached, the book closes. We are not told what Jonah said or did, for it was not intended that Jonah be last in our minds at the end of the book. We are left in the presence of God, face to face with this moving revelation of His love and compassion.

Some think this book ends abruptly, but I think it is really important to see that Jonah was never written merely to tell us the story of Jonah as an end in itself. This is not just the story of Jonah, or of Nineveh. It is a story to reveal God, and once this is accomplished, the writer lays down his pen.

This revelation of God in the closing three verses of the book is really a **great anticipation** of John 3:16; the parable of the prodigal son; and the world embracing the gospel. **It is one of the key places in the Old Testament we view God's love.**

Here's a key thought: Although Jonah's ministry was very successful, Jonah learned that God desires more than mere obedience. He wants His servant to understand His character; to share His viewpoint; to be like Him and love all people.

A second lesson we need to learn from this book is that God's special favor toward Israel did not lessen His love for other people. You see, Israel was not chosen simply for its own sake, but to fulfill the divine purpose, the end of which was to bless all people. The same is true today for all believers. The election of one people did not mean the rejection of others. v. 11—
"But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" God loves all human creatures—men, women, girls and boys—and even animals.

A third lesson for us is that we must care for people more than our own creature comforts.

"Jonah's value scale was so unbalanced... his vision so near-sighted...his life so small...that an insignificant, soulless plant meant more to him than anything on earth"—Charles Swindoll, *Ibid*, p. 78.

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Jonah was more concerned about himself than about the Ninevites. The questions to us are obvious:

- Are any of us more concerned with building shelters and raising plants?
- Are any of us more concerned about creature comforts and selfish living?
- Are any of us more concerned about ourselves than the deep, spiritual needs of people?
- Are there some plants in our lives that need to be removed so we can see our Nineveh?

If that is the case, then we can count on it happening, for our sake and for the sake of those we might reach.

How does this apply to those we don't like, or who are our enemies? For example, those with:

- A different political view,
- A different sexual orientation or sexual practices,
- A different view of the law, violence, family, etc.

The question is, are we witnesses to these people as well? What if they came to Jesus? Would we rejoice, or would we be suspicious? Let me be very specific, so we can apply this book:

How about those of a difficult political view?

We have people in the church who are Republican, Democratic, Independent. Some are not U.S. citizens, so they can't vote; and others despise everything political?

Certainly it's appropriate as a Christian to have political beliefs; that's our right as Americans

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(as long as we understand that every political belief must bow to Scripture). Having said that, it's important that people of a difficult political persuasion know we love them, too. Where we might rejoice or be angry at the political success or failure of those we are opposed to politically, we must above all love them. As important and necessary as political beliefs might be, they are not more important than reaching people for Christ.

You may say, "I can't love a Republican... or a Democrat." Yes, you can, if you see your enemies, those who are opposed to you politically, and those who think or act differently from God's viewpoint. **If we don't, we are no better than Jonah.** Remember, if we don't love people as God does, He has means at His disposal to get our attention, e.g., Jonah 4.

We're talking here about being holy. Holiness is not just about avoiding sin; it's also about being filled with goodness, being like God, loving the people of this world, and giving ourselves to reach them.

Let's take another area of potential struggle:

How about those who are gay, or those who have sexual lives and practices that we are opposed to? Whatever others' sexual preferences or the state of their sexual lives, those who follow the Lord are called to love, not hate. Yes, Scripture gives us the basis for our beliefs about sexuality, but we must learn to love and minister to nonbelievers without condoning their sin. We must see them from God's viewpoint, and be holy (i.e., absent from sin, and filled with every kind of goodness). **If we don't, we are no better than Jonah.**

How about those who may attend this church who are not yet displaying Christian character or attitudes? Some aren't even believers, and others are still immature. They may even continue to practice activities we believe are wrong. Some are children and don't have social graces, or have disruptive behavior patterns? They might even attend our youth group and influence our kids in a negative way.

These are our options:

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- Tell them not to come any more
- Make them act like Christians if they do come
- See them from God's viewpoint; lead them to Jesus and have patience as they grow in the Lord.

If we don't do the third, we are no better than Jonah.

Let this book teach us about God's heart for the world; let's proclaim and model that our God "is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity"—4:2.

The Master Gardener has tended the world:

- He has made it grow;
- He has love for children;
- He has love for animals;
- He has love for you.

If someone you know has a Jonah spirit and it has turned you off or scared you, please forgive. We have a God who loves you, and is concerned about you, more than you know.

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