

WHY IS GOD'S MERCY ALWAYS WIDE?

JONAH 3 & 4

It's possible to miss the real point of many of the Bible's stories. As they were leaving church one Sunday morning, a wife asked her husband if he'd really listened to that morning's message. "Certainly," he replied. "It was about the Pharisee and the publican. It really got through to me. You know, where the publican goes into the temple, falls on his knees and humbly prays, 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!' But the proud Pharisee stands there and says, 'Lord, I thank You that I'm not like other people. I especially give You thanks that I'm not like that publican over there. He's a bad person – a no-good, tax collector. But I'm a good and respectable person.'" There was a pause and then the husband continued, "That Pharisee! He really was a low-down, self-righteous guy, wasn't he? I thank God that I'm not like him!"

Last Sunday and today we're considering the story of the Old Testament prophet, Jonah. It's easy to look down on Jonah or write him off as a person whose heart was in the wrong place. Be careful about condemning old Jonah, however. Be careful of dismissing him as an unenlightened, spiritually dull hypocrite. Bite your tongue before you say, "I thank God I'm not like Jonah!" Some of his spiritual blind spots might also be some of your spiritual blind spots.

The story of Jonah is a lesson in God's incredible mercy. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, – arguably the most important city of that day and time – and preach to the people. God wants to give the Ninevites the opportunity to repent and turn to Him so that He wouldn't have to send judgment upon them. That was God's mercy. But Jonah refuses to go. He hates the Assyrians for their brutality and longs for God to obliterate them. Jonah fears that the people of Nineveh might actually repent and that God will show mercy to them. He wants no part of that! So he runs away from God both literally and spiritually. God sends a violent storm against the ship Jonah is traveling in. Jonah knows God is trying to get his attention so he asks the crew to throw him overboard. They reluctantly agree and the crew survives. God's mercy again. And Jonah survives, too. A great fish – probably a whale shark common to the Mediterranean Sea – swallows Jonah whole. There Jonah stays – in the stomach of that creature – for three days and nights until the fish vomits him up on the shore. God's mercy yet again. Jonah is not the hero of his own story. No, God is the hero and what's on display here is the wideness of His mercy to everyone. For instance...

GOD'S MERCY INCLUDES THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW BETTER.

After making that fish sick to its stomach, Jonah decides that maybe Nineveh is just the place for his next evangelistic crusade after all. He sets off on a 500 mile trek across the desert. No evangelistic advance team meets him when he arrives. No one contacts the churches in Nineveh because there are no churches. No one reserves the Dust Bowl, Nineveh's sports and conference

arena, for Jonah's week of meetings. No counselors are trained to work with possible converts. In fact, no one knew Jonah was coming which was just fine with Jonah because he doesn't really want to be there anyway. He wants to fail!

Greater Nineveh was a sprawling urban area about fifty miles across. It's filled with thousands of people hostile to everything Jonah stood for. Jonah doesn't want to be there and he passionately hates the people God has sent him to. Jonah's message isn't about how to feel good about God and yourself. It isn't about how to enhance your life and be successful by getting God on your side. "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." Perhaps Jonah's messages were longer than that, but that's a pretty accurate summary of their content. I can't imagine a place or a situation with less potential for a spiritual revival.

Here's one of the great ironies in this story. Arguably, the greatest single evangelistic campaign in recorded history – bigger than any Billy Graham Crusade – occurred some 150 miles northwest of present day Baghdad, Iraq! The Bible suggests that virtually every man, woman and child in Nineveh experienced a dramatic conversion like experience. How was this possible? The only answer I can come up with is this one: God wanted to display the incredible wideness of His mercy. He wanted Jonah, you, me and everyone never to forget that He's a God of boundless, infinite and unimaginable compassion.

There are some great lessons here about what happens when people turn to God. First, any genuine move towards God anywhere and anytime must begin with the Holy Spirit already softening people's hearts and preparing them to hear and receive God's message. Jonah's preaching wasn't the reason the people of Nineveh turned to God. Yes, someone had to bring the message, but it was the Holy Spirit that enabled them to receive it. No one just comes to God on his or her own. God always prepares the way. Remember that when you're praying for someone to turn to God. Pray that the Holy Spirit will come, soften the heart and prepare that person for the good news about Jesus.

Second, any real move of God anywhere or anytime will result in transformed lives. The Bible says the people of Nineveh repented and turned away from their sins. They stopped doing whatever it was that so offended God. The only real evidence that a person has truly found God is a changed life. Yes, it's important to pray and receive Jesus as your Savior by faith; it's important to come forward as a public profession of that faith; it's important to be baptized. But none of those matter if they're not accompanied by genuine, inner transformation.

I'm intrigued how God gives Jonah a private and personal lesson on His mercy. Here a whole city of people repents and turns to God. Did you catch Jonah's reaction to what happened in Nineveh? Look again at 4:1-3 (NLT): "This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the LORD about it: 'Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and

compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, LORD! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”

What follows is this very odd scene of Jonah camping out on a hill overlooking Nineveh still hoping that God will “nuke” the city despite the people’s repentance. It gets really hot up there. God, in His mercy, provides a fast-growing, leafy vine to grow up and shade Jonah from the sun. Jonah’s delighted with the plant. In fact, he gets emotionally attached to this lovely plant. But the next day God has a worm chew through the vine’s stem and it falls over leaving poor Jonah to barbecue in the heat again. Jonah just wants to die... again. What a whiner!

God more or less says to Jonah: “Let’s think about this plant you loved so much. It was here one day and gone the next so you couldn’t have gotten all that attached to it. You didn’t plant or water it. Your relationship to it was one of complete self-interest not genuine love. Jonah, I love the people of Nineveh. These people are so incredibly ignorant of what it means to have a relationship with Me. They remind Me of children who can’t tell their right hand from their left hand yet. I created those people, Jonah, and I cherish them despite their many sins. Your ‘pain’ over losing that silly plant is nothing compared to the pain I feel whenever I have to consider destroying them because of their sin and rebellion.”

Through Jonah we get a penetrating view of the wideness of God’s mercy. It includes those who don’t know better! Of course, the people of Nineveh deserved God’s judgment! But what Jonah failed to see – and it’s also what we often fail to perceive – is that God doesn’t operate on the principle of giving you what you deserve. People expect and want God to be fair. Are you sure you want God to be fair? If God was fair, you would die for your own sins. If God was fair, He would crush you with His absolute holiness. If God was fair, you would spend an eternity in hell and be damned forever. Fortunately, God offers undeserved mercy and grace. Mercy means you don’t get what you deserve. Mercy is Jesus dying in your place for your sins. Mercy is God making you holy rather than allowing you to be just a victim of His holiness. Mercy means an eternity in Heaven and a relationship of joy in God’s presence forever. God is not fair! Let’s celebrate and rejoice in that fact! Thank God that He’s not fair!

An old man was walking the beach at dawn and he noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them back into the sea. Catching up with the young man, he asked him what he was doing. The young man explained that the stranded starfish would die if exposed much longer to the increasingly warm morning sun. “But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish,” the old man countered. “What difference does your effort make?” The young man looked at the starfish in his hand then threw it to safety in the ocean’s waves. “It makes a difference to that one,” he said.

Let's praise God that He is indeed "a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love" especially towards people who don't know better. And let's be willing to be the means by which people come to know Him. Are you happy today that no one is beyond God's grace? Can you celebrate that no one is too insignificant to warrant God's attention? Are you blessed by the fact that no one is too far gone for God's mercy? It's so wide that it includes those who don't know better. But here's an equally wonderful truth....

GOD'S MERCY INCLUDES THOSE WHO SHOULD KNOW BETTER.

Who might that be? Jonah... and maybe you and me, too! What Jonah says and does in this book would be funny if it weren't so sad. Most preachers really want to see people repent and turn to God. But Jonah only preaches to the Ninevehites because he hopes they will reject his message and then God would have no choice but to exterminate them. Then Jonah describes God's character beautifully and accurately as "a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love" only to miss totally the truth of it for his own life. Yes, he wants God to be loving, gracious and compassionate to Jonah, but certainly not the Ninevehites. Then there's the fact that doing God's will usually brings joy and meaning to your life, but in Jonah's case doing God's will here results in such a deep depression that he just wants to die.

What's wrong with Jonah? How had he become so cold, so hard and so joyless? Here are three possible answers. First, Jonah minimizes God's mercy towards him. Jonah wants God to be fair but fails to realize that he himself would be excluded if God operated on that principle. Sometimes followers of Jesus want God to punish those who do wrong and do it now! "Away with all those homosexual activists, those abortion providers and those family-destroying liberals!" Or, your point of struggle may be with those who have wounded you in a very personal way. You might want God to punish those who have wronged you, abused you or hurt you in some way. You can be a little like Jonah sitting on the side of some hill wondering why God has not yet unleashed His wrath on all the bad people that have come into your life at various times. My friend, when you come to grips with how merciful God has been to you, it will change how you pray for and relate to those who have not yet responded to that mercy.

What was wrong with Jonah? Secondly, he doesn't know God as well as he thought he did. Jonah's a good example of someone who might have his theology right, but his heart is all wrong. Jonah knows intellectually that God is merciful, compassionate, slow to anger and loving but somehow that knowledge hadn't gotten into Jonah's heart. It's possible to have all the right theology about God while having a totally wrong heart towards God. It's possible to spout all the right words about God but not really believe them in a way that transforms you personally. Yes, Jonah knew something about God, but not enough. Jonah couldn't accept the fact that God was bigger, more wonderful, more merciful and

more gracious than he could possibly imagine. When you know God like that, you will change and you will resemble God's character more and more.

What was wrong with Jonah? Thirdly, Jonah never became truly reconciled to God's will in His own life. Yes, after the terrible storm and after three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish, he agrees to obey God's command and go to Nineveh. But his reaction to the Ninevehites' repentance reveals that Jonah's obedience to God is half-hearted, shallow and joyless. There's a lesson here. You can obey God in such a way that your heart –your inner self – isn't truly broken and willing before Him. Jonah goes through the motions. So can you. Jonah obeys God but finds no joy in it. So can you. Jonah is angry with God because God doesn't meet Jonah's expectations of what should be done. You can do that too. You see the result of those attitudes in Jonah: misery, hardness of heart, harshness of spirit, utter joylessness. Philip Brooks suggests an alternative: "Obedience must be the struggle and desire of our lives. Obedience, not hard and forced, but ready, loving and spontaneous." In other words, God's will is worth doing with joyful surrender or it's not worth doing at all.

Jonah is thoroughly disappointed with God. Has that ever happened to you? God just doesn't meet your expectations. You assume that loving and serving God faithfully is supposed to protect you from problems in life, so you're caught off guard when you still have problems– big problems. You accept that God forgives you sins and empowers you to avoid sin, but then you discover that defeating some sin in your life is just an ongoing, daily battle. You think, "It's not as easy as it should be." You've heard that knowing God is supposed to bring all this joy, wholeness and fullness into your life, but your loved ones still die (some before their time), or some personal issue defies resolution or financial struggles drag on. It's easy to get discouraged and disappointed with God when you discover He doesn't meet all your expectations. If you're not careful - just like Jonah - a cold, hard, bleak joylessness towards God can creep into your heart.

At the end of the day, it's a matter of perspective. Victor Frankl endured something none of us here today have suffered – the terrors of a Nazi concentration camp. He was once asked what made life tolerable for some in those hellish conditions while others simply gave up and died. He said, "What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn... that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly." If you change a few words in that insightful comment, it becomes a spiritual lesson each of needs to both hear and learn. "What is really needed is a fundamental change in my attitude towards God. I have to learn that it doesn't really matter what I expect from God, but rather what God expects from me. I need to stop wondering what I can get out of God and instead think of myself as being questioned by God – daily and hourly."

Let me ask you a question. If you were God, would you have given up on Jonah? I think I would have. Send Jonah home! Get another prophet! But Jonah's story reminds me that God's mercy is wide enough to include even those of us who should know better. Like Jonah, you can forget that you're just as much a recipient of God's mercy as anyone else. Like Jonah, you can think rightly about God (your doctrine) but have a wrong heart towards him (your daily attitude). Like Jonah, you can obey God but do it joylessly. But God didn't just give up on Jonah. And, praise God, he doesn't just give up on you or me either. J.D. Freeman puts it like this, "God has me in His heart, whether I have Him in my heart or not. I do not have to be the most willing for Him to choose me or the most capable for Him to use me. It is not only good people God has used to do His good; it is not only brave people God has used to win His victories; it is not only righteous people God has used to establish right. God does not help me because of what I am. God helps me because of what He is." And that's exactly why God's mercy can be as wide as it is. It's based on Him not us.

Several years ago a Christian missionary began a much needed and extended vacation from her overseas ministry. She'd been looking forward to this time with great anticipation. For the first time ever she was going to have a place of her own: a new, large townhouse-styled apartment with a patio. She's very creative and made the patio the focus of her decoration. After a few months, however, some new neighbors moved in next door. The word to describe them would be "coarse." There was loud music day and night along with a constant flow of obscenities. They urinated in the front yard in broad daylight. They totally disrupted her peace. She could see nothing good in them. She asked the Lord to help her be more loving, but all she got back from her neighbors was rejection. Then a crisis occurred. One day she returned home to discover that her neighbors' children had sprayed orange paint all over her beautiful patio—the walls, the floors—everything! She was distraught and furious. She tried to pray but found herself crying out, "I cannot love them; I hate them!"

Knowing her attitude towards these people was sinful, she began to talk with the Lord. A scripture came to mind: "And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (Colossians 3:14 NASB). In her heart she asked, "Lord, how do I put on love?" The only way she could picture it was like putting on a coat. So that's what she determined to do—she chose to wrap herself in the love of God! She made a list of what she would do if she really loved her exasperating neighbors, then did what she had listed. She baked cookies, she offered to baby-sit for free, she invited the mother over for coffee—and the most remarkable thing happened! She began to know and understand them. She began to see that they were living under tremendous pressures. She began to love her "enemies." She did good to them. She lent to them without expecting anything back. The day came when they moved—and she actually wept - not for joy but for sorrow! A supernatural love had captured her heart—the love of Jesus- that love that's the fullest demonstration of the wideness of God's incredible mercy. And of that mercy we have all received!