

Jonah, Part IV

Scripture Lessons: Jonah 4:1-11; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Matthew 16:1-4.

God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh as a missionary. Jonah refused at first and tried to run away by buying a ticket on a sailing ship bound for Spain. God, however, wouldn't release him from his missionary calling. God sent a storm at sea and then a big fish to swallow Jonah and bring him back to land. The second time God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh he went, but only reluctantly. Through his preaching Nineveh unexpectedly repented and God decided not to destroy it. This really ticked off Jonah.

Why was Jonah so angry? Two reasons. **One, Jonah felt like a fool.** Here he'd gone through the streets of Nineveh like some nut predicting that God would destroy the city in forty days. But in forty days the judgment didn't come. His reputation as a prophet was shot. The mark of a true prophet is that what he predicts comes to pass. ~~But Jonah's prediction never materialized.~~

The second reason Jonah was angry was because **he hated Assyria.** Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. Assyria was Israel's ancestral enemy. Nineveh was mighty and famous compared to Jerusalem. He was bitterly disappointed, as a Jewish patriot, that God hadn't wiped out the city. He was jealous that God cared about pagans as much as he cared about his own chosen nation, Israel. That's why Jonah refused to obey the command of the Lord the first time. He knew that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. *But he didn't want Nineveh to know that.* He didn't want Nineveh to repent so, at first, he refused to go there as a missionary.

God wanted to teach Jonah a lesson about God's love. So after Nineveh repented, pouting Jonah angrily left the city. While Jonah slept on the outskirts of the city God caused a plant to grow up quickly to shade

Jonah from the heat of the desert sun. Jonah was happy for the protection the plant provided. Then God destroyed the plant and sent a sultry east wind and let the sun beat down on Jonah.

This is a parable which God used to teach Jonah about his love. *Jonah loved things more than people.* He loved and cared more about that plant that protected him from the heat of the sun. He was angry enough to die when the plant was destroyed by God. Jonah loved and cared more about that silly plant than he did for the people of Nineveh. He would've been happier if God had destroyed all 120,000 men, women and children of Nineveh while he rested comfortably shaded from the heat of the sun.

Jonah represented Israel of his day. Israel was content to let the world go to hell while they sat in the shade of their peolestinian fig trees. ~~Jonah also represents a large segment of the Christian~~
church today which has become affluent; so affluent and comfortable that we have a tendency to forget that God has given us a mission. Our mission as a church is not merely to provide a comfortable and beautiful place of worship for those who know and love Jesus Christ. It's to take the gospel to modern day Ninevehs and to be a visible demonstration of the Kingdom of God so that the Kingdom might grow by annexing once sinful and rebellious areas of God's creation.

What about this? Do we love things more than people? Are we more concerned about our possessions than we are about human needs? **What are our priorities as a church?** Are we satisfied merely to minister to our own needs and to be fed spiritually or do we see needs outside the church, in the community and world, which we need to have a hand in? Are we more willing to give to buildings or to people who minister? Why is our building fund always over-subscribed but our local mission is

undersubscribed?

On the international level do we support politicians who show more interest in things than people? who are concerned more with property rights than with human and civil rights? The neutron bomb, for example, is symbolic of the attitude that puts things above people. The neutron bomb has the ability to kill people without destroying buildings. I know that the issues aren't quite that simple. I know that it can be used effectively only as a defensive weapon. Nevertheless, people in underdeveloped countries see the neutron bomb as an example of a policy that places greater value on things than people. As Christians, we should vote as Christians, and vote in ways that express Christian values and not in ways which represent merely our own nation's interests.

~~God, however, doesn't value things more than people. God values~~

both people and possessions. Of course, God values people more than things. But he values ~~things~~ and possessions as well. He created material things. They're good. God want's all his offspring to enjoy material as well as spiritually blessings. God's compassion for Nineveh extended not only to the *people* of Nineveh but to their *cattle* as well. Personal possessions and material things are not worthless in God's sight. They are valuable when kept subordinate to human and civil rights. It's only when property and possessions are ^{grasped after while God is equaled or made subservant;} grossly unevenly distributed that they become a snare that drag people down to hell.

The book of Jonah ends with a question which reflects upon the value God places on people and their possessions. "Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

We don't know how Jonah answered that question. We do know **how the nation of Israel answered that question.** The deprecatory psalms call upon God to smash and destroy the enemies of Israel. "Pour out thy anger on the nations that do not know thee." "O daughter of Babylon, you devastator. Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashed them against the rock." Those psalms express some of the most gruesome requests a people have ever made to God. You can hear the anger of Jonah in them. The nation of Israel didn't think God should pity the pagan who didn't know right from wrong.

We know how the people who lived in the days of Jesus answered that question. We read in the gospel according to St Luke, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. ~~And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, This man receives~~ sinners and eats with them." Many of the religious people didn't want Jesus to take the good news of God's love to the really sinful people.

We know that the early Christian church had a hard time at first answering this question. The Sons of Thunder wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy cities that were not responsive to Christ's ministry. When God called Peter to take the Gospel to Cornelius the gentile, Peter, like Jonah, was reluctant to go.

But how do we, the church, answer that question today?

Louis Evely, in *That Man Is You*, describes part of a play by Jean Anouilh and the Last Judgment: The good are densely clustered at the gate of heaven, eager to march in, sure of their reserved seats, keyed up and bursting with impatience. All at once, a rumor starts spreading: "It seems he's going to forgive those others, too!" For a minute, everyone's dumbfounded. They look at one another in disbelief, gasping and

sputtering, "After all the trouble I went through!" "If only I'd known this...!" "I just can't get over it!" Exasperated, they work themselves into a frenzy and start cursing God; and at that very instant they're damned! Love appeared, and they refused to acknowledge it. "We don't know this man!" "We don't approve of a heaven that's open to every Tom, Dick, and Harry!" "We spurn a God who lets everyone off!" "We can't love a God who loves so foolishly." And because they didn't love Love, they didn't recognize him.

We won't recognize Jesus in our midst either unless we understand the sign of Jonah, not only the sign of Jonah pointing to the resurrection of Jesus, but the sign of Jonah which points to God's prodigal love for the whole world.

If we want to see God's kingdom grow then we must go to the modern day Ninevehs? ^{not reluctantly as Jonah did, but as you did,} ~~We must find enclaves of the agnostic, the secularized, the~~ needy, the poor, the sick; people who really don't know right from wrong. That shouldn't be hard to do. And yet aren't we more happy when a solid, conservative, church-going Christian joins the church than when a weak, biblically illiterate, troubled man or woman wanders in off the street? May God give us grace to minister to these more readily than to those who have no need of a physician.

Amen.

Let us pray: O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.