

Jonah Part Five: The Prodigal Prophet

By Pastor David Fields

I. The Questions that Question Us

As a prophetic book we are meant to hear the voice of God to us. The way this book “works”, the point of this ‘cliff-hanger’ is really to turn the question back to us. These questions act as a mirror, forcing us to face the same questions.

“The ghastly separation between what Jonah knows to be true (that God is incomprehensibly and wonderfully gracious) and the realities and truths Jonah is willing to accept reveals an unprecedented egoism that sees him put “God in the dock” so to speak.”

- Daniel Timmer

Makes us ask: “Will we join God in his compassion for others? What will I do in those situations where I feel like I’m justified in my anger – where I don’t want to extend grace to others?”

This text makes us grapple with the ways we may be seeking to justify ourselves, and even opposing God by doing so.

II. Misusing Scripture

Jonah is right, it speaks of God being “compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love.” All that is true. But Jonah carefully ignores other aspects of this text to make his point. Look at Exodus 34:7, where God says of himself that he is “maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...” - Exodus 34:7a

Jonah cuts out this part about God’s just judgment. Why? So, he can present a simplistic view of God in order to feel justified in his anger at God. As Tim Keller puts it, “[Jonah] uses the sacred text to justify his inordinate indignation, anger, and bitterness.”

– Tim Keller

“For what the Bible teaches us about ourselves is all to the effect that we are not righteous, that we have no means of justifying ourselves, that we have...no right to condemn others and be in the right against them, and that only a gracious act of God...can save us. That is what Scripture teaches us, and if we stick to this, reading the Bible is useful and healthy and brings forth fruit in us.”

- Jacques Ellul

1. We should expect that the Scriptures will both comfort and confront us at points. We will find encouragement and challenge.
2. The fact that we tend toward wanting to justify ourselves – this is why we read the Bible in community – in connection with people who are ‘not me’ – because we will find it difficult to notice our particular blind spots.

III. The God of Compassion

Maybe one of the most shocking realizations this book of Jonah leads us to is this: despite Jonah's horrendous theology, despite his racism, his nationalism, his bigotry, pride, egoism, hardheartedness – God is merciful and kind and tender toward his prophet who is spewing vitriol. God loves Jonah. We are truly meeting the God of Mercy in these pages.

God even loves the “Jonah's” – those of us who find ourselves ‘angry’, unmerciful to others, who are quick to judge whether someone may or may not be worthy of God's love.

IV. The Elder Brother and the Prodigal Prophet

Jesus intentionally leaves off the end of this parable of the Prodigal Sons as an invitation for those religious types, to ask them: “what will you do?” And it comes to us too: “How will I treat those whom the God of mercy has welcomed home, even if they have done awful things? Will I celebrate God's mercy to those who did not deserve it? Will I recognize that I did not deserve it either, or will I, like the older brother in Jesus' story, think I earned my place at the table, and want to exclude those who did not?”

Note too: it's possible to be a “Pharisee about Pharisees”. To be “bigoted about the bigots.” “To lack love for the ones who lack love.”

V. Living in Sync with the Heart of God

Bitterness toward others, holding grudges, that will spill out. It will keep us from adopting God's heart of mercy. It will keep us from bearing the ‘fruit’ of goodness and gentleness. If it's allowed to live in us, it will make us harsh, cold, and very far from the ways of God.

How do we address that?

1. Recognizing God's Great Mercy to Me

“God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint.”

– Jonah 4:7-8

God is trying to show Jonah that he didn't do anything to make the plant grow – it was a total gift from God. In a similar way, God doesn't owe us – doesn't owe Jonah, or the Ninevites that mercy he pours out. But he does, simply as a reflection of his nature; that he is the God who is gracious and compassionate.

How can I treat others with ‘un-mercy’ when I've been shown so great a mercy myself?

Jesus says, in his most famous sermon: “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”- Matthew 5:7

“And here is the good news, the gospel: When in that moment we cry out “Lord have mercy,” He does. He comes near, so very near. Mercy Himself comes near, and then empowers us to do for others what He has done for us.

Blessed, in sync with the heart of the Father, with the heart of the Holy God, are those who practice mercy; who do not give those who sin against them what those who sin against them deserve, but who give those who sin against them what they do not deserve—kindness and pardon—for they shall be shown mercy upon mercy upon mercy.” – Darrell Johnson

2. Those are Diamonds in the Dustbin

“And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people...?” – Jonah 4:11a

The Bible tells us that humans are created in the image of God. This is one of the reasons why Christians have insisted that no matter what, each person is of equal value – no matter what challenges they face; no matter what they have done. They are to be treated with respect and dignity.

The question for us is, did we throw diamonds in the dustbin? How does that need to change? Is there someone you wrote off – and where you need to join God’s heart for them?

Judas is going to betray Jesus. And yet – Jesus washes his feet too. Jesus knows what Judas is going to do, and chooses to wash his feet anyways.

Life Group Discussion and Reflection Questions

Open Up:

Have you ever thrown out something really valuable, not knowing what it was worth? What did that feel like when you realized it?

Read Jonah 4

1. What surprises you about Jonah’s response to God in this book? Why?
2. In the message we saw how Jonah does not quote all of the text from Exodus, conveniently leaving out the part that describes God’s justice so as to defend his viewpoint.
 - a. Why might we be tempted to ‘use’ the Bible in the same way?

- b. How can we avoid that?
3. God is very tender toward Jonah, even when Jonah is blasting God and spiralling into despairing of life. Share how you've experienced God's compassion and tenderness even in desperate places. What was that like for you?
 4. Jonah finds himself watching Nineveh and waiting to see if it will be destroyed. Sometimes we might find ourselves in a bitter place. How does reflecting on God's mercy toward us help shift us from bitterness? What habits help us to remember God's mercy to us?
 5. In Jonah 4:11, God draws attention to his compassion for the city and animals of Nineveh. In what directions does God need to point you – reminding you of his compassion?
 6. As you reflect back on the series, what one major point has God been speaking to you about? What would you like to do with that?

Prayer: Take time to pray in response to what we just talked about in the study. Pray that we as God's people would share his heart of compassion. You can even take the prayer offered by theologian J.I. Packer as part of your prayer together:

Prayer from J.I. Packer in his book *Never Beyond Hope*:

"O God, our heavenly Father, we are awed at the spectacle of your wisdom and patience with a difficult man that we find presented in the book of Jonah. We know that like him we too are called to become messengers of your mercy to lost souls, and like him, we erect barriers in our own hearts to the fulfilling of our mission. We know that we have in the past spoiled our service to you by our negativism on some things and our rigidity and pigheadedness on others, and we have closed our eyes and ears to the real needs of real people whom you have prompted us to go and seek to help. For the sake of Jesus, your Son, our Saviour and example, forgive us '*Jonahs*', these ugly failings, and teach us to love the lost as you yourself do, so that the light and love of Christ may shine out in us as we go about your business. Melt us, mold us, break us, change us, use us, and yours shall be the glory. Amen."