

Old Testament Lessons

OT Stories That Teach Us About God and Faith

September 06, 2020

I. Introduction

- A. Today, we are going to use the story of Jonah to look at God's mercy toward exceedingly evil yet spiritually uninformed sinners and Jonah's unmerciful condemnation of sinners he doesn't like.
- B. Prayer

II. God's mercy toward sinners and Jonah's response to God's call to warn Nineveh so they could have an informed opportunity to repent.

- A. **Jonah 1:1** . . . The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai (*uh MIT eye*) saying, [2] "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." (*In other words, their evil had grown so great that God was not going to wait any longer to put an end to it.*) [3] But Jonah (*God's prophet*) rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (*In going to Tarshish and in fleeing from the presence of the Lord, Jonah was acting out his defiant refusal to do what God told him to do*). So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. [4] So the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. (*Though God has so made us that we can defy His orders, we can neither escape His presence, nor His power, nor His response to our sinful choices and behavior.*)
- B. [5] Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep (*as if he could justify doing what he knew was wrong by acting as if what he did was right and good. In other words, Jonah knowingly and willfully disobeyed God and then proceeded to act as if he did nothing wrong, and as if his selfish choices and behavior had not harmful effects on others*).
 1. However, Jonah's disobedience not only resulted in him being thrown overboard (*God's discipline*), it put the sailors' lives in jeopardy and it harmed others by causing the loss of cargo for those who were sending their goods to market via the ship.
 2. Sadly, like Jonah, many of us have chosen to defy God's will and disobey God's word for one reason or another. And most of us, when

- doing such things push the awareness of God's presence out of our mind so we can feel comfortable doing what we know is wrong.
3. And just as sad as that, we are prone to ignore or even justify the hurtful, costly, or relationship destructive effects of our sinful behavior on others.
 4. In other words, we numb our conscience, dull our mind, and act as if what we are doing is right and good so that, like Jonah, we can sleep peacefully while those around us are suffering the effects of our sin.
- C. [6] So the captain approached [Jonah] and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? (*Or, how can you not care about this bad situation and what is happening to all of us?*) Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."
- D. [7] Each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. [8] Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" [9] He said to them, "**I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land**" (*Jonah knew the right theological or Biblical answer to who he was and the God he identified with. However, he didn't live accordingly, as proven by the fact that his fear of God was so negligible that he fearlessly did what he knew was wrong. This is like saying we are born again, evangelical Christians who believe the Bible, while knowingly living contrary to what God's word says in some areas of life.*).
- E. [10] Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "**How could you do this?**" (*I want to remind you that the "How could you do this?" question ought never to be asked by us Christians, for we ought to be so honest with God about ourselves that we know how easily we are tempted and how often we do what we know is wrong.*) For the men knew that [Jonah] was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. [11] So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"—**for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy**. [12] He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you."
1. Have you wanted something so much that you were willing to disobey God to get it? Sadly, Jonah did, and he was a prophet of God. And just as sadly, I have, and I am a pastor teaching others.

2. Have you acknowledged that the ensuing consequences were the result of what you did? Jonah did. He admitted that what was happening to him, the sailors, and the cargo was his fault. He knew he had brought this on himself and all of them. What about you? Do you make that same connection, or are you still blissfully asleep?
- F. [13] However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them (*They tried to save Jonah from God's discipline, but God wouldn't let them.*). [14] Then they called on the LORD and said, "We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased." (*In other words, "Don't kill us on account of Jonah's sin, and don't condemn us for throwing him in the sea to save ourselves.*) [15] So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. [16] Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. [17] And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.
- G. In **Jonah 2**, we have Jonah's prayer. God responded to his prayer by commanding the fish to vomited Jonah up onto the dry land (**Jonah 2:10**). This brings us to **chapter 3** where God told Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh and warn them of God's coming judgment. And this time Jonah went as directed.
- H. [**Jonah 3:3**] So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. [4] Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." [5] Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. [6] When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. [7] He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. [8] But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men **call on God earnestly** (*with the result being*) that each may **turn from his wicked way and from the violence** which is in his hands. [9] Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish." (*The king didn't laugh at the idea that God would destroy them, instead he called for city-wide repentance, humility, and a change*

of behavior in order to seek God's mercy. And he did all this without a guarantee that God would be merciful.) [10] **When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way**, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

1. Here we see the convergence of **God's wrath** against sin, **His mercy** toward the sinner, and **His justice**. We see God's wrath against sin in His judging the Ninevites as being so sinful as to deserve to be destroyed.
2. And why would they deserve to be destroyed? Because they practiced sin, and had practiced it for so long without any hint of repentance that God's justice was motivating him to put an end to their sin. But to do that, He had to put an end to them.
3. However, even though God was ready to destroy Nineveh, He felt something for the Ninevites. In my opinion what He felt was the painful loss of losing them as His children – now and for eternity. And so He sent Jonah to warn them. This is God's mercy toward sinners – whom He loves and wants relationship with. And the scripture affirms God's love for sinners and longing to treat them with mercy in –
 - a. **2 Peter 3:9** . . . The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.
 - b. **1 Timothy 2:3-4** . . . This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, [4] who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.
4. And we see God's justice in relation to Nineveh in that His mercy is shown to those who repent and verify their repentance by changing their behavior. As we just read, "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented. In other words, when justice is protected by a sinner's change of behavior so they stop harming others unnecessarily, God extends mercy."
 - a. Paul affirms this in **Romans 2:13** when he says that it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.
 - b. And in **James 1:22** we read, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."
 - c. Jesus addressed this matter in **Matthew 7:24-27**, "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25]"

And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. [26] Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. [27] The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

- d. And according to **Romans 6**, Jesus didn't die so we could continue in sin, but so we would stop knowingly and willfully sinning and start knowingly and willfully living a godly life. And it is the saved sinner's commitment to live a godly life that completes the circle of justice. You see, there is no justice in showing mercy to sinners if the sinner willfully continues to sin and in so doing continuing to harm others. (*Remember the cargo?*)
- I. **Jonah 4:1** . . . But [God's response to the Ninevites' repentance] greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. [2] He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said [would happen] while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this (*that is, to counter what I knew You would do because I know better than You*) I fled to Tarshish, for **I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, and one who relents concerning calamity** (*and I don't want you to relent of your decision to destroy Nineveh because they deserve to die.*) [3] Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."
 1. Have you had such ill-will toward someone, or have you been so deeply hurt by someone, or are you so frustrated with someone that you think they deserve God's punishment in this life and the eternal fires of hell in the next?
 2. Have you refused or avoided witnessing to someone because you felt they deserved to die in their sin? This is how Jonah felt toward the Ninevites.
- J. [4] The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry [with Me for not destroying the Ninevites]?"
 1. The question is one we should be asking ourselves, though we may want to adapt it to our own situation. For example, do I have a good reason to be angry with God for (and you fill in the blank)?
 2. Knowing how sinful I have been and still am at times, do I have a good reason for wanting this person (*i.e., parent, sibling, co-worker,*

neighbor), or that people group (*i.e., ISIS, ruling faction, political party*) to be condemned to hell? Knowing how grateful I am for God's grace shown to me, shouldn't I be grateful that He shows grace to anyone who repents, puts their faith in Jesus Christ, and lives accordingly?

3. Think about this. Jonah, a prophet of God, had just openly defied God by doing the opposite of what God told him to do. As a result, he had been thrown overboard into a turbulent sea, swallowed by a great fish, and spit out on land. Did he get what he deserved?
 - a. I don't think so, for the Bible says, "To whom much is given, much will be required" (**Luke 12:48**). I think Jonah fits into the "To whom much is given" category, don't you?
 - b. Yet God showed him mercy. And what was Jonah's response? Was it gratitude? Was he now eager for God to show mercy to the Ninevites? No. After all this, Jonah was still angry that God showed the Ninevites mercy.
 - c. Do you see how easy it is to act as if we deserve God's mercy while deeming others so evil that they don't?
 - d. Yet in spite of Jonah's anger, God continued to show mercy by asking him questions to get him to think about what he is doing in hope that he would see the absurdity of his attitudes and actions.

K. [5] Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city (*He was still hoping God would destroy Nineveh and its inhabitants.*). [6] So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort (*In spite of Jonah still hoping for the destruction of Nineveh, God showed patience by beginning a teaching session in hopes of getting Jonah to think sensibly, and God showed mercy by providing protection from the hot sun.*). And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant (*We praise God for His grace and mercy toward us, yet treat others as if they are unworthy of such grace and mercy – either from God or from us.*). [7] But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. [8] When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."

1. If you look back on your life, can you see when God has used circumstances to teach you to think honestly and sensibly about

yourself, and about being gracious and merciful toward others, and about wanting the salvation of heinous sinners as much as you want salvation for yourself?

2. God speaks, not just in nature, our conscience, and the scriptures, but also through our circumstances. May we wisely listen and hear what He is saying and learn what He is teaching.
- L. [9] Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" (*Once again, God graciously engages Jonah with a question intended to get him to think about his attitudes, beliefs, values, thoughts, and actions.*) And [Jonah] said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death (*how stubborn we can be in our selfishness and sin*)." [10] Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant (*that is, you didn't want it to die and felt bad when it did*) for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. [11] Should I not have compassion on Nineveh (*not want them to die and feel bad if they are destroyed*), the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand (*God saw them as ignorant and needing enlightenment which is why He sent Jonah. What about us? Are we ignorant and needing enlightenment in relation to doing what we know is wrong? Hardly! Yet we want God to be gracious toward us while wanting Him to be less than gracious toward those we are angry at or hurt by or frustrated with.*), as well as many animals?"

III. Conclusion

- A. God is gracious and merciful, and we are the recipients of His grace and mercy. God is also just, and His justice is for all humanity, including justice in regard to eternal salvation and justice in regard to the harmful effects of our sin on those around us.
- B. Therefore, may we continue to work toward self-honesty, sensible thinking, and godly attitudes as we live and work with people who are less than what we want them to be so that we run away from being like Jonah and run toward being like God.