

The Greatness of God's Mercy

A Study from the Book of Jonah No. 4

Please Read Jonah 4

You will recall that the first lesson in this series on the Book of Jonah pointed out three great characteristics of God: (1) God's mercy, (2) God's sovereignty, and (3) God's love. There are few stories on record of God's dealing with people that show more clearly God's mercy than the incidents in the book of Jonah. These experiences should give great reasons for rejoicing.

There was mercy for Jonah, mercy shown to the pagan sailors, and the account of God's mercy to the people of Nineveh. Nineveh was a very wicked city. But God used the preaching of Jonah to bring a revival to the city. God postponed the judgment that Jonah had prophesied. If there had ever been a cause for rejoicing, certainly these evidences of God's mercy should have provided it. We would expect Jonah to be literally leaping with joy and thanksgiving. But instead, as we come to the fourth chapter, we find Jonah on one of the worst "pity-party trips" imaginable. Jonah was angry about what had happened, and he was angry with God.

In Jonah 4, we see a saint of God under the power of the flesh. It was the flesh that led to his fleeing from the presence of the Lord. It was the same power that was controlling him when he sat down outside the city, after delivering his message, to see what the Lord would do.

Few of us realize what a strong place self has in our lives, until something comes up that touches our own personal dignity. It is then that we show what we are really made of. Just like Jonah, we too are inclined to permit pride and self-will to control our actions and reactions, causing experiences in our lives which do not make us more Christ-like, but rather show that the old carnal nature is still too much in control!

1. Jonah's Anger at God's Mercy

Jonah was very angry (verse 1). He had obeyed God and done what God wanted, but God had not done what Jonah wanted. Jonah had told the Ninevites that judgment was coming in forty days, but the judgment did not come. Jonah felt betrayed. He felt that God had let him down by not destroying the city as he had predicted. In addition to this, Jonah did not have the slightest concern for the people of Nineveh. Jonah should have been happy at their deliverance. Instead, he was displeased that God had not wiped them from the face of the earth.

In Jonah's anger at God, we notice three practical lessons. First, Jonah tried to justify himself and his disobedience both in his own eyes and in the eyes of God. He said, "I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of evil" (verse 2).

We all do what Jonah did. Things don't turn out as we wish, so we seek to justify our disobedience. We need to learn that we are not sufficient to pass judgment on the outcome, nor are we responsible for the outcome. We are responsible only for performing the whole will of God! For example, when we feel we ought to visit others, or witness to them, we say, "But it will take time and I won't get my work done. After all, I need to be a good steward of my time. I try to do my best and live as I believe is right, but others misunderstand me. So why try?"

Second, Jonah tried in his anger to quote God's Word back to God in his desire to show that he was right and God was wrong. Jonah was saying (in effect), "Now, is that not what You have said? And if it is what You have said, why did You send me to Nineveh with a message that you never intended to fulfill? Is it not true that I, Jonah, am the consistent one, and that You, God, are wrong?"

This lesson applies to us today when we read the Bible and try to find verses and passages that justify our own behavior. For example, we might read, "Be ye angry, and sin not." And so we might say, "God, I didn't sin in the anger I was manifesting." We sometimes try to justify ourselves and excuse sin in our lives.

In the third place, Jonah, in his anger, asked for death again. "Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live" (verse 3). It is hard to understand the prophet's apparent death wish. When he had run from God, and God had confronted him with the storm, Jonah thought it would be better to die than obey. He asked the sailors to throw him overboard. Now, having obeyed, he is still unhappy, and says once more that he would rather die and get it all over with. It is a warning for us today that it is possible to obey God, but to do so with such a degree of unwillingness and anger, and thus the obedience is no better than disobedience.

2. Jonah's Basic Problem

Jonah was not reconciled to the will of God even yet. He was opposed to God's will at the beginning and ran away because of his opposition. God dealt with Jonah through the storm, in the belly of the fish, and seemingly Jonah had sincerely repented. Yet in spite of this, Jonah's attitude had not yet changed. He was still unwilling to see the people of Nineveh saved, and he resented the God of mercy for having saved them.

We tend to act in the same way, even when we are apparently obeying God. We are doing what we think we should be doing, living the kind of life we think a Christian should live. But secretly we are unhappy and angry with God for making the requirements. For this reason many Christians look and act miserably much of the time. Where is our focus fixed?

Jonah also forgot God's mercy to himself. Jonah had certainly experienced mercy at the hand of God. He should have perished in the belly of the fish. But there was the long journey across the desert to Nineveh and our human memory is short. Jonah had forgotten God's mercy and was therefore poorly prepared to appreciate it when God showed the same mercy to others.

Today, we too must remember this when we find ourselves wondering, somewhat regretfully, why God does not judge someone else for their sin. We forget that we were once where that person is now, and that we would not be where we are now were it not for God's great mercy on us.

Another thing that was wrong with Jonah was that he did not know God as well as he thought he did. Jonah had a great knowledge of God. He was a Jew, and Jews had received an accurate revelation of God which the pagans did not possess. Jonah was a prophet, he had studied the Law and had been commissioned by God. If anybody knew God, it should have been Jonah! But did he? While he knew something of God, he did not know God well enough to grieve over sin as God grieves over sin, or to rejoice at the repentance of the sinner. Instead, Jonah was like the older son in Christ's parable (Luke 15) who sulked while the father rejoiced, and felt cheated by the prodigal's return.

In our day we sometimes find ourselves wishing that Jesus would return, usher in the final judgment and escort the believers into Heaven. We are grieved when unbelievers scoff at our belief in the Second Coming. We wish Jesus would come, and we wonder why the delay. This is because we do not understand God well enough. (Notice 2 Peter 3:4-9). Peter explains God's delay of judgment by referring to God's mercy. Jesus has not yet returned in order that all whom God desires to call to faith in Him might have the Gospel preached to them, and believe. Aren't you glad that Jesus did not return before you accepted Him? We need to rejoice that Christ's delay makes possible the salvation of still others. God is a God of judgment. But He is also a God of mercy and we need to recognize His mercy, and invite others to receive the benefits of that mercy.

3. God's Questions to Jonah

Jonah did not yet know God as a God of mercy. So God proceeded to teach him by asking three significant questions that conclude the chapter. God likes to ask questions because they are effective in helping us see the real condition of our hearts.

God asked Jonah, "Doest thou well to be angry?" (verse 4). What was God really asking? "Jonah, we are looking at the same situation in two different ways. I am pleased with it. You are angry. Which of us has the proper perspective?" Whenever God asks that type of question, we must recognize that whatever our thoughts or feelings may be, it is always God who is correct and not we. "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (Romans 3:4). Jonah did not think like that. He did not confess his sin. Instead, he became even more angry and left the city. And on the outskirts of the city, he constructed a little shelter for himself. There Jonah waited to see if God might not destroy the city after all. In doing this, Jonah made three grave mistakes.

First, he quit. Jonah abandoned his mission to Nineveh even though he had no right or instruction by God to do so. God had sent Jonah to Nineveh to preach to the people. Since, as a result of his preaching they had repented and turned to God, Jonah should have stayed and taught them more about this merciful God. But Jonah was not willing to do this for the city or for God.

In the same way, many Christians today quit the work God has given them because God does not carry through according to their expectations or their timetable. Something happens that doesn't suit us and we quit. We have no right to do that.

Second, Jonah built a little shelter for himself, which again he had no right to do. Were there no shelters or homes in Nineveh? Were there no places where the prophet of Israel, who had been the one to bring such spiritual blessing, would be welcome? Of course there would have been. But Jonah was not interested in these shelters. He still secretly despised the Ninevites and hoped that God would destroy them.

Third, Jonah became a spectator. He sat in the shadow of the shelter "till he might see what would become of the city" (verse 5). Jonah was not called to be a spectator, any more than Christians are called to be spectators of the world's needs today. Jonah was called by God to identify with these people and help them as best he could by the grace of God. And so it is with Christians today. We've been called to serve the Lord willingly, joyfully, out of a heart of appreciation and gratitude for what he has done within us. We ought to want others to be saved equally as well as ourselves and our loved ones.

Before God asked Jonah the second question, He caused an unusually fast-growing vine to spring up next to Jonah's shelter. It became a shadow for him, a protection from the blazing desert sun. "And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd" (verse 6). Notice that this is the first time that Jonah had been happy about anything. He didn't like God's first commission, nor the storm, nor the great fish, even though it saved him. Jonah was not happy about the second commission, nor about the repentance of Nineveh. Nothing seemed to please him. But here at last, Jonah was very happy. Why? Jonah was pleased because, after all the compassion God had shown to other people, God was finally doing something for him. This is nothing more or less than selfishness!

Having caused the vine to spring up, God then caused a worm to attack the vine so that the plant withered. After that, God caused a vehement east wind to blow from the desert that brought Jonah to the point of fainting from the terrible heat. Now Jonah became more angry than before, and again he expressed a wish to die.

So God came and asked the second question. "Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?" (verse 9). By this question God exposed Jonah's real problem. Jonah had been angry at God. But now God says that Jonah was even angry at a little plant, which was not even a worthy opponent.

The same thing happens today when we become angry. We begin by being angry at big things, but quickly we become angry at little, petty things. First we are angry with God. Next we express our anger at circumstances, then minor circumstances. Finally, our shoe string tears one morning, and we even get angry at that. God was showing this truth to Jonah, saying in effect, "Look where your anger has taken you, Jonah. Is this right? Is this the way you want to live? Do you want to spend the rest of your life being 'all bent out of shape' over the smallest of things?"

Finally, God asks Jonah the third question, and it is with this question that the book closes. “Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it to grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?” (verse 10,11).

Jonah was sorry for the vine which grew without his doing anything for it. The vine, having been killed by the worm, was an innocent victim. So God spoke to Jonah about the innocent things of Nineveh: the cattle and the 120,000 children. Surely Jonah ought to have understood that God would spare Nineveh for their sake, if not for the adult population who could and did repent. Surely Jonah’s compassion for the innocent vine should have helped him see God’s compassion for Nineveh.

The Book of Jonah ends with a question that has no written answer. It ends with a question in order that each one who reads it might ask himself or herself the same question: Is God not right? Is He not great for showing mercy?

The lessons in the Book of Jonah are many. There are lessons that concern Jonah, the sailors, and Nineveh. There are lessons relating to the doctrine of God’s sovereignty over man and nature. But greater than all these is the lesson of the greatness of the mercy of God.

How great is God’s mercy? The real measure of the wideness of the mercy of God is that of the outstretched arms of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as He hung on the Cross to die for our salvation. That is the wideness of God’s mercy. That is the measure of the length to which the love of God will go. How can we, who have known that mercy and benefitted from it, be less than merciful to others? How can we do less than love them and carry the Gospel to them with all the strength at our disposal?

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