

Jonah Part 1 – To Love Mercy

Why is Jonah in the Bible? It is really an exceptional book in many ways. He is regarded as one of the twelve ‘minor’ prophets, but it is unlike the others in almost every way. With the exception of Jonah's one sentence sermon, there are no extended judgments listed, no predictions made. Instead, it is a biographical excerpt of one of the prophets. It recounts the story of the prophet Jonah, and particularly of one incident in his life.

Like with all the historical accounts in the Bible, we are expected to ponder why God included this as part of inspired Holy Scripture. Romans 15:4 tells us, ‘Whatever things were written before, were written for our learning’.

However, don't make the mistake of thinking that this is a parable – a fictional tale to teach us things. Jonah was a historical person. The Lord Jesus mentioned Jonah at least twice, and spoke of him as a real person. The actual events call us to enter into them, experience them, and instruct us while we study them.

So to understand why this book was written, let us take a bird's eye view of the whole book. The year is around 760 BC. Israel and Judah are two separate kingdoms. Judah, in the south, is still faithful to Yahweh, while Israel, in the north, is not. During this time of false religion, Jonah is given a rather positive message.

2 Kings 14:25-27 ²⁵ *He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher.* ²⁶ *For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter; and whether bond or free, there was no helper for Israel.* ²⁷ *And the LORD did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven; but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.*

Jonah is appointed to be the messenger of political victory. God chooses to restore the territory of Israel, not because of the peoples' faithfulness, but because of His mercy. Jonah gets to declare this. Undoubtedly, this was a popular message. As you know from modern-day experiences, popular messages make for popular preachers.

But then his ministry takes a sudden turn. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire, and preach to it. Assyria is Israel's arch-enemy at this time. Prophets living at the same time as Jonah - Hosea and Nahum - have already prophesied that Assyria will conquer and take Israel into captivity. And now, Jonah is called from patriotic proclamations, to a message of mercy to the enemy.

This would be like a British missionary sent to Berlin during World War 2.

Not only were the Assyrians the enemies of Israel, they were vicious and cruel. Archaeologists have discovered Assyrian artwork which depicts their soldiers skinning prisoners alive and stabbing them.

What do we call it when God does not give people like the Ninevites what they deserve? *Mercy*.

God wanted to show mercy to Nineveh. But He also wanted to show mercy to some sailors, and He also wanted to show mercy to a hard-hearted prophet. In chapter 1 God has mercy on the pagan sailors. In chapter 2 God has mercy on rebellious Jonah. In chapter 3 God has mercy on Nineveh. In chapter 4 God has mercy on Jonah again.

But the message of the book is not simply about God being merciful. It is more than an account of

the action of mercy. It is a lesson in what our attitude toward mercy should be. It reveals God's heart by contrasting it with Jonah's heart.

Because this book was written and included in the Hebrew Scriptures, before the time of Christ, it was a message to them about God's mercy, and what their attitude towards it should be.

And today the Book of Jonah continues to preach to us about God's mercy, and what *our* attitude towards it should be.

We'll see four things from the book of Jonah, corresponding to each of the four chapters.

I. Jonah Refuses to Have Mercy (Chapter 1)

After Jonah gets the assignment to go east to Nineveh, he literally goes the opposite direction – west to Joppa, catching a boat bound for Tarshish.

Why did Jonah flee? He actually tells us in chapter 4. Jonah fled because He feared that God would be good to Nineveh 4:2. He hoped for its destruction. Jonah was so filled with hatred for the Assyrians, so concerned that God might show them the same favour He showed to Israel, that he detested the thought of them knowing the true God and turning to Him. He refused to have mercy on them.

Now you might ask yourself, why would God give a man an assignment he doesn't want? Why would God give a man a ministry that he hates?

The answer is: *to reveal that man's heart to him*. I previously preached a message entitled 'What's coming out of your Tea-bag?' In this message I used the illustration of the hot water and the tea bag. The hot water doesn't create the taste, it draws out the taste from the tea bag; just as trials don't make us sin, they draw out the sin from within us. The hot water of trials brings out what is already in our hearts, and this is what God intended with Jonah.

Of all the people God could have chosen to go to Nineveh, why did he select Jonah? Because God wanted to do something more than a work *through* Jonah, he wanted to do a work *in* Jonah. In the same way, when God calls on you to have mercy on this world, He is not only seeking to work through you, He is seeking to work in you – to change you into His image.

Ask yourself for a moment, 'Is there someone you refuse to have mercy on?' Perhaps someone you have not forgiven. Perhaps an entire group of people you believe do not deserve the Gospel or any other kind of mercy? Perhaps someone you work with, school with – whom you feel is beneath the Gospel, they won't want to hear it. In fact, they are so worldly, so disgustingly crude, they don't deserve to hear it – it is too good for them.

It is always a dangerous sign spiritually, when we are growing cold in mercy. Which group of people in the New Testament are outstanding for their coldness in mercy?

Luke 7:36-48 – The Pharisees.

People who realise they need mercy, are grateful for it and extend it to others. People like the Pharisees, who think they do not need mercy, tend to be very stingy and selective in giving it. Jonah had come to this place of coldness of heart, where he felt some people did not deserve mercy, and he refused point-blank to give it to them.

His disobedience causes those with him to be caught up in a storm which God sends to prevent his prophet from going any further. They eventually have to throw him overboard, where he is

swallowed by a giant fish.

II. Jonah Requests Mercy (Chapter 2)

A word about the fish: scoffers like to mock the book of Jonah, saying that this was impossible. However, there are many sea creatures capable of swallowing a man whole. The Bible includes whales when it speaks of fish – it does not use our biological classification system, and there are a number of creatures – the sperm whale, the blue whale, the whale shark and probably some extinct species that could easily swallow a man whole. There have been some reports of people who have been swallowed by a whale and been recovered alive. Furthermore, God was doing something miraculous here anyway, so we need not quibble over the details, since we do believe in miracles.

Jonah now finds himself in a place where nothing except mercy will help him. So that is what he asks for (Verses 2, 4, 7-8). Jonah is asking the Lord to have mercy on him and save him.

Isn't it odd how we can call out to God and expect Him to be merciful to ourselves, even when we not shown mercy to others. Jonah cried out for mercy in the belly of the fish, but refused to extend mercy to Nineveh in the first place, and he was indignant when God did show mercy to them later on.

The Bible is very clear – you should forgive as you have been forgiven; you should show mercy, as you have been shown mercy. Those who request it, but refuse to give it will run into problems.

Recall Christ's parable of the servant who was forgiven a huge debt by his master, and then refused to forgive the very small debt of one of his fellow-servants. And He ends it this way:

Matthew 18:33-35 ³³ *Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?* ³⁴ *And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.* ³⁵ *"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."*

Matthew 6:14-15 ¹⁴ *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.* ¹⁵ *"But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

Matthew 5:7 *Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.*

But this is the gracious heart of God. He extends mercy to Jonah. The fish vomits him onto dry land.

III. Jonah Declares Mercy (Chapter 3)

Now Jonah comes to Nineveh, and preaches the sermon found in verse 4: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" We do not know if Jonah preached more than that one recorded line. If that is all he preached, it shows that he hardly even preached mercy he preached judgment. But, God sovereignly worked through it to show His mercy. The Bible says that from the least, to the greatest, including the king, they show humility, they cry mightily to God and they turn away from their evil works. The king states their desire for mercy.

Verse 10 tells us that God saw their repentance and relented of His judgment, and had mercy on the entire city. This a great act of mercy, because Nineveh was a very wicked city, of very many people.

IV. Jonah Despises Mercy (chapter 4)

Here is the interesting thing about the book of Jonah. If the main point of the book of Jonah was

that God wanted Nineveh to hear Jonah preach, the book should end with chapter 3. But it doesn't. Instead, we have this almost comical chapter 4. Jonah is furious. There is no hiding it. He makes it very clear in verse 2 – *this is why I ran away in the first place* – as if to justify himself. And since his attempted suicide in the sea didn't work, he asks God to just kill him. In other words, he really hadn't learned the lesson God was trying to teach him. He was still refusing to be merciful, and was now downright angry. He did the deed of mercy, but he hated the fact that the Ninevites received the message.

God asks him the rhetorical question, “Is it right for you to be angry?” And now Jonah goes and sits outside the city, hoping that their repentance was false, and that judgment might still come to the city.

There sits Jonah, the picture of self-righteous, self-pity and arrogance. He despises the idea of mercy on his enemies.

Now the last part of the book is where God sets up an object lesson for Jonah. God is going to teach Jonah the point He has been seeking to get into his heart all along; and with the help of a plant, He will do so.

God wanted more than Jonah's compliance. He wanted his heart. If all He wanted was an action of compliance, the book would end at chapter 3. God pursued Jonah to teach Him the heart of mercy.

So God mercifully allows a large plant with broad leaves to grow supernaturally quickly, and it relieves Jonah in the intense heat. It is a mercy, and once again, Jonah is very happy to *receive* mercy.

But the Lord isn't actually in the business of giving permanent comfort to unrepentant people. So, once Jonah is emotionally attached to his plant, God sends a worm to kill the plant. And, once the plant is withered, God sends a suffocatingly hot wind on Jonah's head. And Jonah repeats his suicidal chant - (v8) “It is better for me to die than to live.”

So God asks Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

And hear the impertinence in Jonah's voice – “It is right for me to be angry, even to death!” Jonah's sin has made him bitter, unreasonable, and plain ugly to behold. So now God gently instructs his rebel prophet.

‘Look at yourself, Jonah. I have been trying to get you to co-labour with me, to love having mercy on the Ninevites. Even when they have repented of sin, you still despise them. Even if you cannot bring yourself to have mercy on the adults, how about having mercy on the 120 000 children, and the dumb animals?’

‘Yet now you have great mercy for a plant which has lasted for 24 hours, which you did not plant, tend or give life to. How could I, their Creator, who made them, made them grow, how could I not have mercy on them? How is it Jonah that you can have mercy on a plant, which lived for 24 hours, but have no mercy on a city of hundreds of thousands of souls?’

Do you know what the answer is? The reason Jonah could have mercy on the plant and no mercy on the Ninevites was because Jonah felt he deserved mercy and the Ninevites didn't. He believed it was good and right for him to receive mercy, but not for the Ninevites. In other words, Jonah was completely and utterly selfish. He was so self-centred, and so wrapped up in his racist and petty patriotism, he felt it was just plain wrong for God to show mercy to people Jonah didn't like.

Do you know what is driving your heart when you have no mercy on your neighbours? Do you

know what is ruling you when you say things like 'Let them rot' or 'They do not deserve the Gospel, this is too good for them.' It is the same thing that was in Jonah's heart – intense pride. I deserve mercy, but from now onwards, I'll decide who else deserves it.

Do you know what is driving you when you feel little to no compassion for the Nigerians, Zimbabweans, Malawians, Angolans, Zambians, as they flood into our borders. Or when you have no compassion for the prisoners in our overcrowded jails? Or when you have no compassion for those with AIDS wasting away to death; or on the street kids sniffing glue; or on the wealthy Jewish people in surrounding areas; or on the smug and arrogant corporate climber; or on the elderly in the many nursing homes? The answer is – *selfishness*. And selfishness is the opposite of love.

When our attitude to all or some of the above is 'They deserve what they're getting', the answer God gives is – '*None of you are really getting what you deserve.*' No one deserves mercy – that's a contradiction in terms.

God convicted Jonah through his affections, not his actions. God convicted Jonah not about his service, but about his heart-attitudes. Jonah had done the deed of mercy, but he had not enjoyed it. He had not loved it. In fact, he hated it. For the Lord, that is hypocrisy. God does not hate showing mercy – He delights in it. God does not only want us to experience mercy, or to 'do' mercy, He wants us to *love* mercy. It is all too easy to have missionaries whom we support to go to people we can't get to. It is another thing to love having mercy on those people and pray for them. It is one thing to say you believe in evangelism and in preaching the gospel, it is another to love mercy and to love showing it to friends, colleagues, family, acquaintances and strangers and to share the Gospel with them.

Micah 6:8 *He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?*

Here is the message of the book of Jonah – '*I, the Lord, love mercy. It magnifies my glory that I can save sinners from their self-imposed misery. And if you claim to be my child, my servant, you must love mercy. You must repent of pride, and of your partiality, and your prejudice, and your cliquishness, and your racism, and your narrow-mindedness, and embrace my heart – I love to show mercy.*'

Think of what ancient Israel would have felt as they read this book. In some ways, Jonah was a picture of Israel itself – arrogant, indifferent to the nations around it, complacent, and frankly disobedient to the call to be a light to the Gentiles. This book would have convicted them of their parochialism, their small-mindedness.

What message does it send to the church?

Jonah is a picture of us too, isn't he? We like our ministry to be to our group, to the ones we like, and identify with. We like showing mercy to decent respectable people. But preaching the Gospel to illegal immigrants, or girls who have had abortions; or ministering to convicted criminals; or taking on the financial burden of adopting an orphan; or leaving our first-world comforts to preach the Gospel to third world countries? No, frankly we hate that idea. That would mean getting our hands dirty. That would mean great sacrifices of time and money. That would mean getting into the dregs of sin and false religion and poverty. In other words – like Christ.

This is not a message on how we are to show mercy – that could be a series of messages. It is that God wants us to love mercy. People who love mercy find ways to show it. People who feel they deserve mercy do not.

We are like Jonah. We are very good at receiving mercy, but not always very good in giving it. We feel that God should be impartial regarding giving out mercy when we are the ones who need it, but

we feel we can pick and choose when we are giving it out.

We cannot be that way and enjoy the love of God.

In the end, if we claim to be like God, we cannot simply imitate His actions. We must have His heart.

Luke 6:36 *Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.*

His heart is to love people. Therefore He loves showing mercy. Ask yourself, ‘Who am I most reluctant to show mercy to?’ They are probably the ‘hot water’ needed to show you your heart and to love showing mercy.