Jonah: Chapter 4

Summertime Monday Night Bible Study (RAW)

Introduction:

Welcome back to our Monday Night Bible Study! Thank you for your faithful attendance over the past several weeks and for the number of you who are interested in receiving our notes regarding Jonah.

As I began to think about Jonah's fourth chapter, a particular television show and a specific episode of that show came to mind: Magnum P.I.'s episode, *Did You See the Sunrise?* Perhaps you may remember this as the episode when Magnum kills a man in cold blood – a man without a weapon or a way to defend himself. The fictional character that Magnum killed, Ivan, had previously killed Magnum's friends and had committed to killing more of his friends and others. Magnum, with the help of his buddies, determined that this would not happen. *Justice*.

Justice is hardly an unusual theme in television and movies – it is the crux of essentially every action show or movie in Hollywood. Justice is something we desire – even something we demand as humans. This should not be surprising to us – we are created in God's image, after all, and we know from Scripture that God is just.

Yet, we *also* know the end of Jonah, Chapter 3: Jonah had been commanded by God to go to the horrible, violent, Israel-hating, despicable people, the Assyrians, and to warn their large city of Nineveh that God was set to destroy them because "their evil [had] come up before [Him]" (Jonah 1:1). Shockingly, these evil people, according to both the Scriptures and Jesus, *repented* of their actions after hearing the

words of God through Jonah's message: "God saw their actions – that they had turned from their evil ways – so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). And *that* it where we will pick up tonight.

Let's pray and dive right into God's Word!

Jonah 4:1-2

Oh boy. Jonah was in a bad place. He was in a place which many of *us* share at times: he knew the character of God and he saw the repentance of his enemies – and this was *not* the *justice* he desired.

- This level of grace was foreign to Jonah – how *in the world* could God allow grace to such an evil people? Did God not remember that the Assyrians had committed idolatrous acts against Him? Did God not recall that the Assyrians had warred against His own people, Israel? Did God not notice that these pagan Assyrians, these murderers, these torturers, these vile, sinful, bloodthirsty Gentile savages, had committed *so* many evil and unspeakable acts? How could God *do* this?
- In *fury*, Jonah said, "Please, LORD, isn't this what I thought while I was still in my own country?" In other words, "I just *knew* this would happen. Why do you think I split in the first place?!"
- Then we see the most unusual thing: this wayward prophet, despite his anger and hatred of the Ninevites, *knew* God *well*. How do we know this? He said several absolute truths about God:
  1) God is gracious and compassionate. What do you think about when you hear the term "grace?" God *defines* grace – He *is* "gracious" as Jonah said – but how so?

- We know from Scripture that there is "common grace" for all of humanity; that is, we *all* share in God's provision and sustenance on the earth; in the order He provides; in His own laws; and in His universal good acts (John 1:1-4; Hebrews 1:2-3). Jesus said, "…for [your Father] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 4:45b). Because of common grace on all humanity born in the image of God, we "each have a conscience" and know right and wrong, truth and lie, and justice and injustice. This is all due to God's grace for us.
- We also know from Scripture that God offers a "special grace" to those who accept His Son, Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior (Matthew 7:7-12; Luke 2:1-14; Romans 5:1, 5:8-11; Ephesians 2:8-9). We have discussed in our previous study the various beliefs about grace itself, so tonight I will only remind you that this "special grace" is defined as the undeserved, unmerited favor of God to humanity – to all who call on the name of Jesus (Romans 10:13).
- This great compassion – as Jonah said – this great grace, as all the Scriptures agree – is a vital characteristic of the God who loves us: "Light shines in the darkness for the upright. He is gracious, compassionate, and righteous" (Psalm 112:4).
- Jesus is compassionate. When He saw the grief of Mary and Martha, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Before Jesus fed the crowd of four thousand, He told His disciples that He had "compassion on the crowd" because they did not have enough to eat after staying with Him for three days (Mark 8:2). Even James, who was known for his rather straightforward leadership style, said that "the Lord is compassionate and merciful" (James 5:11b).

2) God is slow to anger. When we consider compassion and God's patience, we too come to the same realization of the biblical authors, including Jonah himself. Nehemiah also spoke of the Israelites' rebellion and God's corresponding grace: "But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love" (Nehemiah 9:17b).
    - How about you, my friends? Are you like me in that you can think of many occurrences, maybe even now, when God is showing great patience with you? How many times have we had to pray for compassion and mercy – even for the same sin? How great is God's compassion!
3) God *abounds* in love. Talk about being in a bad place: Jonah was essentially *complaining* about the abounding love of God. Yet, Jonah was right in that God is loving and it is even more than that, God *is* love – he *defines* love (1 John 4:8).
    - It is the very basis from which He brings us to Him: "But God proves his own love for us in that while were still sinners, Christ died for us. How much more then, since we have been declared righteous by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath" (Romans 5:8-9).

Jonah 4:3

When Jonah considered the God he served – the all-knowing, everywhere-present, all-powerful, gracious, compassionate, loving God who is slow to anger – he decided that he wanted to…well, die.

- Wait, what? God is so good that Jonah wanted to die??
- What is up with that?!
- Well, Jonah in his "fury" decided that he had just absolutely *had it*: better to *die* than to watch these evil people get saved by God.

- And there you have it: the emotion that Jonah, and we all feel at times: anger…not just being a little miffed, not just having a rough morning, not just being upset…*real* anger, or furious anger as the Word says.
- I have often said that anger comes from one of three sources: fear, frustration, or failure, or a combination of some of these. Another author said it like this, "Anger. It is the emotion you feel when your expectation of justice is not met" (Eric C. Redmond).
- Is there anything wrong with anger? We know that Jesus, in anger, drove the wrongdoers from the Temple – *twice*. Obviously, here and in other Scriptures, we can see that God personally gets angry (try out the Old Testament prophets' messages if you do not believe me!). Jesus, in the Temple accounts, was *right* to be angry; after all, the people were making a mockery of a place meant for worship of *God*. A *lot* of churches should keep this in mind today – just saying.
- So, it *is* okay to be angry at times.
- Unrighteous anger, though, is unhealthy and dangerous. We all know that uncontrolled anger is sinful (read the Proverbs for more information about this topic). This type of anger has to do with a "gnawing sense of injustice," whether this injustice occurred currently or in our past. Ironically, the justice we image-bearers crave occurs sometimes is not met – at least according to the standards *we* have set. This happens within all of us at some point: we become indignant to the point of unrighteous anger because of a sense of injustice in our lives.
- And sometimes there *is* injustice in our lives – we see people being harmed, people's very lives being upended – and the

perpetrator goes free. We even have a phrase for it here in America: “He or she gets away with murder.” Not actual murder, mind you, but instead an expression of frustration regarding someone who always seems to get away with doing wrong. The Psalmist asks, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?” (Psalm 2:1). It seems like there is not hope sometimes. Evil begets evil. Abusers keep abusing (sidenote: *no one* should ever stay in abuse. If you, or someone you know is being abused, find help. Find help now).

- Back to our account, this sense of injustice – How could God allow these people to be saved? – is *exactly* the place where Jonah was. And I believe him: I think he genuinely wanted to die rather than to see these people saved by the Perfect and Only God.
- Then we see God’s simple response to Jonah…

Jonah 4:4

You may read this differently than I do, but I see great compassion in the LORD’s question for Jonah: “Is it right for you to be angry?” This question, in my mind, is very gentle. God did not *tell* Jonah that Jonah’s attitude was bad, or that he was out of line to be so questioning, or that he was wrong about the previous nature of the Ninevites. Instead, He simply and gently asked Jonah, “Is it right…” There is much to learn from the LORD’s question:

- Jonah, in his anger, commits a vital error: he desires his version of justice over God’s extension of grace, and he sincerely would rather die than be a part of God’s plan for these people. Jonah’s version of who God is may have been spot-on in several instances,

as we have already observed, but that does *not* mean that Jonah understood God's grace. He clearly did not.

- Jonah also thought the Ninevites to be unworthy of God's love. This was not merely the historic – and right – contention that the Jews were (and still are) God's Chosen People; no, this was something else altogether. This was someone from God's Chosen People acting as if all the prophecies regarding the Gentiles were untrue or irrelevant. *Jonah* decided these Gentiles did not deserve grace and he desired God to follow suit.

Don't miss this: this was a wrestling match between God and a mere human being. This is hardly the only place in Scripture that we see this either: 1) Abraham argued back and forth with God regarding Sodom and Gomorrah; 2) Abraham's grandson, Jacob, wrestled with God to the point that Jacob's leg was disjointed; 3) Gideon wrestled with God over whether or not he should be sent out to lead the Israelites in battle; 4) Saul (later Paul) wrestled with God over the church people that Saul persecuted (in supposed service to God, no less!); and Peter wrestled with the Lord so much that his other nickname should have been "Sumo." For examples, Peter wrestled with the Lord over God's plan for salvation, over Jesus washing his feet, and over God's call to Peter to go to Cornelius's house.

- If I am being entirely transparent, I wrestled with this chapter. My study when I am teaching is generally extensive, but my own desire for justice regarding a particular situation made me study even more this week – it made me pray more too. The truth is that we *all* wrestle with God regarding our lives at times.
- Even Jesus wrestled with His ultimate sacrifice while praying in the Garden but with one major caveat that Jonah did not – and we often do not – consider: nothing is above *the will of the Father* to

> Jesus. For Jesus, it was always about our Father's plan: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me – nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

No, Jonah was not about his Father's will in this instance. He desired justice – on his own terms – for his people, Israel, and he desired God to mercilessly pour out divine wrath on these evil people of Nineveh. As Christians, we cannot be like Jonah. We must desire the will of the Spirit and the Gospel of Christ more than anything else, all to the glory of the Father who gives us life.

For Jonah, God was not done with him. He did not allow Jonah to die, and He provided an object lesson for Jonah and for us.

Jonah 4:5-8

God is so amazing!

- First, we must again notice God's sovereignty over His own creation, from the plant to the east wind. This east wind was from the direction in which the unyielding sun's force and heat most extenuated Jonah's absolute misery. I once was in the desert town of Victorville, California on a business trip, and I felt like this while simply walking to the car from the office I had visited. A hot wind on a hundred-degree-plus day is just the worst thing – it is a *relentless* heat.
- Here in our account, the angry prophet left the shelters of Nineveh for the hardship of the sun, but at least he was grateful for the plant, so his attitude was not a total loss. How like us this is – we are thankful for some things but angry about others!
- Second, we must understand that the plant provided for Jonah was much more than *just* a plant provided for Jonah – it was an object

lesson for us too. As we recently discussed regarding the covering of leaves provided by God for the fallen Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, this plant is also, I believe, a shadow-and-type of Christ Himself.

- Jonah was pitiful, angry, and without apparent remorse. Yet God still loved him and provided him a covering: "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).
- If we think we come to God without the Spirit's drawing us, or that we are good enough in our own merit for God, or that we know more than God, we are seriously missing it…and missing Him. As one writer noted, Jonah could have been swallowed up by the fish and never heard from again – but God showed him great mercy even in his rebellion.
- Think about it! This prophet of God – this great preacher – did not desire for God to save the people to whom he preached! Instead, he sat idly by still hoping that God would ultimately provide the wrath that Jonah desired for his enemy, the Ninevites. So, the angels may rejoice when one is saved (Luke 15:10), but not Jonah.
- Nope, not Jonah at all. When Jonah's covering was removed – when he was again out of the will of the LORD who had called him – Jonah's attitude suffered greatly, and he desired to die. And then the LORD asked him again:

Jonah 4:9

Do you think Jonah finally relented and confessed his sin to God. Nope. He again argued with God and essentially said that God was wrong and that he, Jonah, was right! Jonah replied, "Yes, it's right!"

- Uh, oh. Jonah has had it now. Here comes the lightning strike! Or, at least, that what we might think would happen. Good thing it didn't, or we would have also been struck down at some point. All of *us* have attitude issues at times, even those of us who have been repeatedly shown the mercies of God.
- See, the fatalistic and infuriated Jonah did what we do: we ponder, worry, rationalize, grieve, and grow so angry when we cannot fathom what God might be doing in the moment to be almost unable to function. We forget to trust the God that saved us, and we forget that worry is not what God intends for us. As Chris Hodges said, "The difficulties we face can't be our problem and God's problem at the same time." Paul said to the Philippians (4:6-7), "Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."
- "When we realize that [God] is in control, that he alone is God and is infinite, powerful, loving, and all-knowing, then it's suddenly much easier to relax and enjoy the present moment. [God] never intended for us to worry about what might happen, what could happen, what should happen, or what will happen. He only asks that we follow him and live in this moment right now."

After Jonah replied to God a second time in this chapter, and after Jonah showed an unwillingness to change (at least up to this point), the LORD seems to answer Jonah in a firmer manner:

Jonah 4:10-11

Whoa! Talk about getting to the point. God pointed out that Jonah lamented over the loss of God's provision for Jonah, but that he did not

care about the more than 120,000 people in Nineveh. The LORD considered their lack of spiritual understanding – they did not know their right from their left hand, in other words – when He determined the level of justice, and mercy, that He would extend to these people. The LORD took it a step further and noted that if Jonah was not compassionate for the people, then he should at least have compassion for the animals! Wow. Or ouch, maybe.

- I do not mean to be political here, but I have to say that in the last twenty years, I have noticed an almost hatred between people of opposite political parties, even among Christians. Discussion has been replaced by debate, listening by talking, humility by pride. It sounds much like this conversation between a righteous God and a prideful, hateful Job: Job was simply not *listening* to God. *
- Interestingly, we do not know Jonah's final disposition. God, as He always will, has the final word in this Book that He wholly inspired. "God is God, and we are not."

We cannot miss here in these final two verses the most important lesson from the entire Book: God desires to save people. Period. He is patient with people – He is patient with us: "The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

All. Jesus wants to save all. "He is the answer to every human question. He is the salvation in all the sufferings of the world. He is the victory over all our sins. In Him, you have God himself in his power and the human being in complete powerlessness" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

We *must* remember this truth in the Church. Wounded skeptics and hurting people come through our doors every week. If they see injustice or deception within the Church members, as did the people during the Pharisees' time, then how will they recognize Jesus? How will they

recognize that the Church must be a place of genuine justice, love, and peace, if we do not demonstrate a love for Jesus at all times?

As the Word says (Romans 10:14-15): "How then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news.'"

Oscar Thompson, a professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, once left "a treasure of wisdom" in a rough format which his wife, Carolyn, compiled and published: it was called *Concentric Circles of Concern*. My late father was at the same seminary during this time, and I vividly remember, even as a child, my Dad's teaching about these Concentric Circles of Concern:

- First, we get right with Christ.
- Secondly, we reach our immediate family, then our relatives, our friends, our neighbors and associates, our acquaintances, and Person X, that stranger who needs Jesus.
- It was a relational approach to evangelism – we reach people first through our own relationship with Jesus, and then with our relationships with others around us.

The truth is, that as Christians, we sometimes get caught up in the rat race of life. Remember that Jesus, in the Parable of the Sower, warned us that some people get off the right path because of the "cares of this world." Jonah did. We do too.

Our path – always – must be in line with Jesus's will and call on our lives. We must follow where He leads. We must love people along the way, even those who are unlovable, and we are to carry the Gospel of Peace wherever we are. We are His ambassadors, His Light-Carriers. Let

mercy reign in our hearts as we have received grace and mercy ourselves.

Conclusion

As I end this wonderful study of God's amazing love, I would just like to thank you again – for all the prayers, the cards, and the tokens of love and appreciation. It is my prayer – and I have given you several such sources in the notes regarding sound biblical interpretive methods – that you will read God's Word and study it well. As Paul said to young Timothy, "Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that you have heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit through the Holy Spirit who lives in us."

Let's pray.

I love you all.

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