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The Wideness of God's Mercy

Jonah 4:4-11

Intro: As has been mentioned, Jonah is unique among all of the Prophetical Books of the OT. Out of the 17 books written by Hebrew prophets, Jonah's is the only one that tells a story. All the others contain prophecies, warning against judgments or recitations of visions. Jonah is the only one written in prose and the story ends abruptly with a question from God – no answer from Jonah, no answer from a later editor, no epilogue is provided; we're not even given so much as a "moral of the story." So, why was the Book of Jonah written? What purpose did it serve at the time of its writing? The book itself doesn't explicitly provide a reason but the contents seem to emphasize at least 3 probable reasons for its writing and inclusion into the OT canon.

The first and most important lesson from Jonah is the undeniable truth that the God of Israel has a compassionate love for all people. We clearly see this in [ch4](#) and this is a truth that should not be a difficult pill to swallow for modern Christians. But in Jonah's day, many in Israel held to warped views of God's character. These Israelites were being called back to imitate their own God more accurately. Now, you can't say that they were misinformed – Israel had the only true revelation of the only true God. The problem was, they began to think more highly of themselves than they should have and this distortion of self-analysis led to a distorted view of God.

Next, when we compare the response of the sailors in [ch1](#) to God's obvious hand in their circumstances with the response of Jonah; we can see the unfortunate truth that pagans could be more spiritually sensitive than Israelites – even an Israelite prophet! Again, many Israelites had become spiritually proud (We're God's chosen people!) and they needed to be reminded that all people, including themselves, were equally in need of the Lord's grace, mercy, love and forgiveness. Being an Israelite didn't mean you were above sin or better than any other nation. Israel was closer to the knowledge of God but that only benefitted those who applied that knowledge to their lives.

The 3rd lesson of Jonah is that God is pleased when people repent and He responds by removing His discipline and ending His judgment. God ended

His discipline of Jonah when he turned back to the Lord in humble thanksgiving and praise. The Lord granted clemency to the Ninevites after they repented and cried out for mercy. The lesson for the Israelites in Jonah's day was that many of them needed to repent, either to avoid a coming disaster or to be delivered from some current discipline.

Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of king Jeroboam II. [II Kings 14:23](#) tells us that he was a wicked king who support a politically-motivated form of idolatry. Despite this, God mercifully blessed his reign and Israel became very prosperous during this time. Unfortunately, this prosperity lead to a wrong use of power, an inordinate pursuit of luxury and the oppression of the poor, all of which was denounced by contemporary prophets like Amos, Isaiah and Micah. Israel did not handle this prosperity very well and the wickedness which became widespread under Jeroboam II actually heaped up judgment for the northern kingdom.

These 3 reasons are closely connected. Those who are spiritually proud are the quickest to forget their own need of God's mercy and compassion for others. Such pride leads to patterns of sin that demand the Lord's discipline and/or justice. The Book of Jonah serves as a somber warning to all believers against any type of spiritual pride and a clear call to keep the Lord's mercy and love so strongly before our eyes that we remain humble toward Him and become passionate about sharing such wonderful mercy and love with others around us.

The shocking thing for me is realizing that all of these glaring failures in the spiritual character of Israel are clearly manifested in the thoughts, actions and attitudes of Jonah. He somehow views himself as deserving of God's mercy but sees others as deserving God's justice. He has forgotten his own sinfulness and deep need for mercy. He has also misunderstood the heart of God. The Lord created humanity to experience love not wrath, blessing and not cursing, and this is true for all His creation. What this shows is that, even though Jonah was a true prophet of God, he was more a product of the evil mindset of the Israelite society of his day than he was of the God he served! This is a healthy reminder that it is not enough to just love Jesus, we must pursue Him in our lives by deliberately laying aside the thought processes of the evil world in which we live and putting on the mind of Christ.

4-5 – God now begins to deal with Jonah at the depth of his attitudes. In this, we find that the book has come full circle. At the beginning it was just the story of 2 personalities: Jonah and God. After Jonah ran away, the sailors were brought into the story and then eventually all the people of Nineveh. Now, here at the end, we're again back to God and His rebellious prophet. But, it's always that way. God gives us work to do and that work always involves other people. But in the end, when you get right down to basics, it's always a question of each of us as an individual and God. It's a question of whether or not we have obeyed Him.

Last week we looked at the pouting prophet but now, Jonah is just sulking! Clearly, he's angry but God comes to him and asks a pointed question: "Is it right for you to be angry?" In other words, "Is this the right response?" The implication is clear: was it right for Jonah to be angry that the same mercy and grace that he had received from the Lord should be shown to others! This is the 1st of 3 questions that concludes the book. Apparently, Jonah hasn't quite learned his lesson yet so God, in His mercy, begins to teach Jonah (and Israel) more about His mercy and He does so by asking questions.

God likes to ask questions; not for information but because they reveal the state of our hearts. His questions also put us on proper ground before Him as He has every right to question us and we owe Him a response. God asked questions of Adam and Eve: "Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from? What is this you have done?" (**Gen 3:9,11,13**). He asked Cain after he murdered his brother: "Where is your brother Abel? . . . What have you done?" (**Gen 4:9-10**). After David had sinned in committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband killed, Nathan came to ask him, "Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?" (**2 Sam 12:9**). God asked Isaiah, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" (**Isa 6:8**). Jesus asked Judas, "Are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (**Luke 22:48**). He asked Peter 3 times, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" (**John 21:15,16,17**). He asked Saul, "Why are you persecuting Me?" (**Acts 9:4**). God asks probing questions to reveal the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts.

What does God's first question to his sulking prophet mean? Quite simply it

is a challenge to Jonah to judge whether the angry prophet or the great and holy God of the universe is right. It is as though God had said, “We are looking at the identical situation in two different ways, Jonah. 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, not us. Jonah didn’t think like that nor did confess his error. Instead, he became even angrier and left the city. On its outskirts he built a little shelter for himself and then waited to see if God would destroy the city after all. Suddenly God’s promise to destroy Nineveh seemed very important to him.

Jonah makes 3 errors here. First, he quit. He abandons his mission to Nineveh even though he had no instruction from God to do so. God had sent him to Nineveh to preach to the people and they repented and turned to Jehovah. Because of this, Jonah should’ve stayed there and taught them more perfectly. But Jonah wasn’t willing to do this for Nineveh. In the same way, many Christians today abandon the work God has given them because He doesn’t come through according to their expectations or their timetable. How many “servants” of the Lord abandon their work when it proves too difficult? How many ministers quit the ministry God has called them to? We have no right to do that.

Second, Jonah built a little shelter for himself, a private retreat, which again he had no right to do. Were there no shelters in Nineveh? No homes? No places where the prophet of Israel, who had been the vehicle of such great spiritual blessing, would be welcome? Of course there were! But Jonah was not interested in these shelters. He still secretly despised the people and hoped that God would judge them. To put it starkly, Jonah launched a little separatist movement in which he established his own independent church—all because he disliked the people of Nineveh. He creates his own enclave in the shade where he will be at peace with himself. Just like when Christians try to design a church specifically to meet their own desires. These may be churches that are full of good intentions, well constructed and even effective in the community but they are not the body of Christ.

Jonah’s third error was to become a spectator. He sat in the shadow of his shelter “to see what would become of the city”. He wasn’t called to be a spectator, any more than Christians are called to be spectators of the world’s ills and misfortunes today. He was called to identify with those

people and help them as best he could by the grace of God. There is no question but that the world we live in today is off it's collective rocker but if all we do as a church is sit around, wringing our hands and saying, "Boy, it sure is bad out there!" then we're no better than Jonah. If God's people, who know how it's all going to end, are aghast at the sorry condition of the world today; how much more dreadful and hopeless are the hearts of those who don't know God or His Word? There are lost people out there who are literally scared out of their minds and they don't know which way to turn. We know the Way, we know the Truth and we can bring them to the source of all Life by simply pointing them to Jesus Christ!

6-8 – Jonah still hadn't come around to God's way of thinking, but God still hadn't given up on him. God had a 2nd question. But before He asked it, He did something to prepare Jonah's heart for the message. God responds with an object lesson because He still wants Jonah to know that His mercy and grace are not to be hoarded by one people but are to be shared freely and widely. First, He caused an unusually fast-growing vine to spring up next to Jonah's rude shelter. Just like the great fish was prepared to keep Jonah miraculously alive for 3 days in the sea; this plant was appointed by God to deliver Jonah from the sun. It provided shade, protection from the blazing desert sun.

Just like the great fish; this plant is about more than just rescue. It was appointed to teach Jonah a lesson. The writer makes this clear by using the same play on words as in **3:10-4:1**. There, Nineveh was rescued from disaster (ra'ah) and Jonah was exceedingly displeased (ra'ah). Here, it's Jonah who is rescued from discomfort/disaster (ra'ah) and he is exceedingly glad (grateful). Jonah has experienced the very same thing as the Ninevites and yet he responds in exactly the opposite way! This self-centered hypocrisy would have been impossible for the original audience to miss and yet, Jonah clearly missed it. But, the Lord is about to make it abundantly clear.

Still, Jonah was very happy about the vine, which is remarkable since this the first time in the story that Jonah has actually been happy about anything. The first thing we read about in the story was God's commission to him to preach in Nineveh; he had not liked that. Then there was the storm; he had not liked that. He did not like the great fish, even though it was the means by which God saved him from certain death. Apparently, he had not been

happy even with the second commission. He had not been happy with the repentance of Nineveh. Nothing pleased him. But here at last Jonah was very happy. Why? The answer is obvious. Jonah was pleased because at last, after all the compassion of God for other people, God was finally doing something for Jonah. Selfish? Of course, it was. And petty too! For the vine was a trifle compared with the conversion of the entire city of Nineveh.

Having delivered Jonah from discomfort for a day, the Lord withdraws His deliverance and allows Jonah to experience discomfort at full strength by turning on the blast furnace. The God who caused the vine to spring up also did something else. He prepared a worm to attack the vine so that the plant withered. The saving shade is now gone and the sun rises to bake Jonah in his little booth. On top of this, God caused a withering east wind to blow from the desert that brought Jonah to the point of fainting from the terrible heat. You'd think that Jonah would get it but no; he becomes angrier than ever; his heart grows harder and he angrily asks the Lord to put him out of his misery.

9 – At this point God asked His 2nd question. His 1st question was, “Is it right for you to be angry?” This was a question of who was right, God or Jonah. This time God asked, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” This question exposed Jonah's pettiness, for his anger had brought him down from being angry at God (a worthy opponent) to being angry at such a petty thing as a vine or worm.

The same thing happens when we become angry. We begin by being angry at big things, but if we let our anger fester then we quickly become angry at petty things. First we're angry with God, “How could you let this happen?” Then we're angry over our circumstances, then minor circumstances. Finally, our shoelace breaks one morning, and we “lose our religion.” God was showing this to Jonah, saying, in effect, “Look where your anger has taken you. Is this right? Is this the way you want to live? Do you want to spend the rest of your life swearing at petty annoyances?”

10-11 – At last God asks His final question, the one that closes the book. In it, God draws a striking contrast between Jonah's reaction to the plant and his reaction to Nineveh. The Lord's description of the plant is intended to show how little the plant should mean to Jonah. He didn't put any effort into planting it; he didn't cause it to grow, he had no time to get attached to it (or

reason to). It was just a day-old weed that happened to grow up beside his shelter.

On the other hand, everything about the Lord's description of Nineveh is meant to show how much it should mean to Jonah. God doesn't talk to him about the adult population of the city, who undoubtedly deserved the judgment Jonah was so anxious to see fall on them. God talks about the smallest children in the city, referred to as those who could not even discern their right hand from their left, and the cattle, who were also innocent. Was God not right to show mercy for their sake? Doesn't Jonah's misplaced compassion for the vine vindicate God staying His judgment? Jonah could put his silly plant on one side of the scale and the population of Nineveh on the other, people who were created in the image of God! Which is weightier? Which matters more?

The book ends with a question and no response is recorded. The Lord's question hangs in the air unanswered. This is not a mistake; it's intentional. When a story ends with a question, the only ones who can answer it are the readers. The question forces us to think about the answer, it forces us to fill in the blank. Is God not right? Is He not great for showing mercy? What is our response?

There are plenty of good lessons in this book. Lessons concerning Jonah as a type of practically everything: a type of Christ (who was buried but who rose again), a type of Israel, a type of all believers (for we all run away from God at times and need to be disciplined). There are lessons concerning Nineveh and the true meaning of repentance. There are lessons relating to God's character and the doctrine of His sovereignty over the lives of men and nature.

But greater than all these is the lesson concerning the greatness of the mercy of God. How great is God's mercy? There are hymns that compare it to the wideness of the sea. But even that's not wide enough. The real measure of the wideness of the mercy of God is the outstretched arms of the Lord Jesus Christ as He hung on the cross to die for our salvation. That's the wideness of God's mercy. That's the measure of the length to which the love of God will go for lost souls – even to a horrible death on a despised cross.

How can we, who have known that mercy and benefited from it, be less than merciful to others? How can we do anything less than love them with God's love and carry the gospel to them with all the strength at our disposal? 😊