

The Tree
Jonah 4

Romans 2: 1-16
Romans 2: 17-29
Psalm 33: 8-15

This morning we are going to be finishing up the book of Jonah here in chapter 4. This has been an interesting book to work through, and I would like to think that this account that we have written down for us, was taking from Jonah's own recalling the events when he returns back to Israel, hopefully having learned his own lessons throughout this journey, but there is no way of knowing if Jonah learned those lessons, or if he was the one to recall this story for chapter 4 ends abruptly with an unanswered question..but rather I would argue it is a rhetorical question for the answer should already be known. So let's go ahead and read chapter 4 and see the conclusion of this story. (read chapter 4)

After everything that Jonah has been through, he still holds on to his anger, still holds on to this judgment that Nineveh does not deserve mercy. This chapter contains a statement here that I think is shocking in revealing Jonah's own hatred toward the people of Nineveh, he asks God In verse 2, "please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." He is so angry in the redemption of the people of Nineveh, so upset that they would turn from their wicked ways that he says it would be better for him to just die then to continue on to see God's mercy toward them. This is not a good look for one of God's prophets, for one of God's messengers. The entire point of this story is to show I think, the stubborn unfaithfulness of Jonah, and Israel, and it stands as a condemnation to them both that Nineveh would repent, that the people to the city would turn from their evil ways and cry out to God. Yet, we see Jonah constantly returning to his rebellion, constantly responding in anger, constantly rebuking God for his mercy, even though he himself has been a recipient of great mercy.

There is sort of a parallel running through this entire book, the response of the pagan Gentiles to the revelation of God, and the response of Jonah to the revelations of God...and while Jonah fights and argues every step of the way the pagan Gentiles cry out in fear seeking redemption when confronted with the power of God. According to this story, it would seem only a few days have passed since Jonah was in the belly of the fish, maybe a week, or 2 since he originally got the message from God to go to Nineveh in which he decided instead to flee in the opposite direction. But in context, it would seem that if Jonah is sitting outside the city walls, watching to see what the Lord would do...it is likely he was there a bit preaching the word that was given to him to tell them, for God said he would destroy them in 40 days unless they repent..so Jonah sitting outside the city I would imagine would be closer to that 40 day mark.

So he would have been walking through the city, giving the message that he was given to deliver, repent or be destroyed, and seeing the people responding in a positive matter, listening to him, heading his warning, turning from their evil ways and repenting in sack cloth and ashes...and then he sits outside awaiting the destruction of the city, complaining that people had heeded the warning. There is an arrogance here, and a deep hatred for the gentile people of Nineveh and God uses this tree that he springs up over night to give shelter and shade to Jonah again as an object lesson to teach Jonah, and all those who would read this account about his judgment and his mercy. In each step of the way Jonah praises God when he receives mercy, yet cries out in anger and disappointment when he see's others receive mercy.

In verse 2, we see this, we see that he is angry at the Lord for his mercy upon Nineveh, and he says that this is why he fled in the first place, for he knew that God was merciful and kind and would relent instead of destroy them. God's mercy knows no limits, his grace was not just for the Israelite's, but for the gentiles, his mercy is not just for one nation, but for all nations who will confess him, who will turn from their evil rebellion and follow him. And this reality angered Jonah, it would seem that he believed that God's mercy and grace should be only given to the people of Israel, and we see even in the new testament accounts with the pharisee's and saducees, that mind set has not really changed. This anger and disappointment was all consuming, verse 3 he says it would be better that he was dead then to witness the mercy of God upon the Ninevite people. Jonah is not learning his lesson here, and neither has the people of Israel. Throughout all of scripture we see this up and down nature of their belief, and rebellion against God, this is mirrored in Jonah as he switches between praise, and anger in God's treatment of himself vs others.

On the surface it would seem that Jonah's hatred for Nineveh is based on the fact that they are pagan gentiles, but his problem goes deeper than just ethnic pride and prejudice, such things are merely a symptom of a greater problem which is spiritual pride. The lesson that is to be learned here is that no one is worthy of God's mercy, no one stands on any moral high ground before God, all are guilty and all deserve his judgment, all need mercy and grace, even Jonah himself, even Israel herself. This realization should bring an end to any spiritual pride, knowing there is nothing of ourselves that is good, nothing of ourselves that is worthy, and we like Nineveh deserve judgment and destruction. Yet so many are like Jonah, so many are like Israel, puffed up and arrogant in their spiritual pride believing that they are deserving grace, and others judgment. This is why salvation is of the Lord, not of our own ability, for if it was by our own ability we would have something to boast about, we would have something to have pride in, we would indeed be a special people deserving of salvation. But instead it is God and God alone, who has shown mercy to us while we were sinners, while we were rebellious, while we hated him, he called us to himself and caused us to believe. His mercy came before we deserved it, his mercy came before we even would have had a chance to earn it.

Those who compare themselves to others will always find reasons for pride, but those who compare themselves to the Lord will realize their own wickedness and cry out for mercy and salvation. The people of God should be likewise a merciful and forgiving people, for if God has forgiven us so much, should we not also forgive others? We are called to be messengers of his mercy, and if we like Jonah are looking forward to destruction, instead of crying out to the lord on behalf of the sinners and unbelievers and rejoicing in their salvation if it comes, we are no better than the Pharisees. Believing ourselves worthy of God's grace, and casting judgment upon all who are not us. There is a place for righteous judgment, there is a place for condemnation, but it is for God to determine not us, it was God's choice to warn Nineveh, it was God's choice to offer them salvation from the destruction he was preparing for them, not Jonah's. His spiritual pride and arrogance lead him to treat the Ninevites as those who were undeserving of God's mercy, therefore he was undeserving of his own mercy as he was awaiting their destruction. This is the danger of spiritual pride, it is a focus upon the sins of others and forgetting about our own, viewing others lower than ourselves therefore they are unworthy of compassion and grace.

When the reality is we are all unworthy of the grace that God gives, we are all sinners, we have all fallen short no matter how hard we try, no matter what we do or accomplish we can not earn God's favor, It is God and God alone who gives, and who does so out of his own good pleasure. We are merely recipients of his grace and he works within our hearts and minds to believe, and to know him.

Look at the contrast here, between Nineveh, and Edom in the book of Obadiah that we went through. God sent a messenger, one to warn Nineveh, Turn and repent, or be destroyed. With Edom, he did not send a messenger, in fact his prophesy went to Israel who was in captivity to encourage them that those who were against them will be destroyed, and they will return to their land, and will inhabit the land of the Edomites, their enemy. We can not answer the question why God chooses to show mercy upon one, and not the other, but we can rest in the wisdom of his purpose, and we like Moses can stand in the gap, and pray for those “destined for destruction, that God may relent.” This should be the heart of the believer, a heart of mercy who has a concern for the lost, who wants to see those who are lost in their sins to be freed from that slavery and come to know Jesus. Jonah should have been rejoicing to see the redemption of the Lord, he should have been rejoicing in Nineveh turning from her evil ways, yet he scoffed, and was angry, and wished he himself would die, for he would rather have died then to witness God’s mercy upon the pagan gentile people of Nineveh.

God’s response to Jonahs cry for death, is in verse 4 “is it right for you to be angry?” he wants Jonah to think about what is going on here, he wants Jonah to learn this lesson, to view all people as he views them, not through religious pride and national identity and arrogance, but as sinners needing redemption, he wants Jonah to understand that these people are important to him, they are also made in his own image and are objects of his mercy and love. In this question, he is asking Jonah to review, to think about what has been happening, he’s basically saying, Think about this Jonah, You have just experienced my forgiveness for your own sin as you cried out to me in the belly of the fish, you have just experienced my gracious deliverance from the judgment you deserve, is this really the right way to respond to others who have experienced the same mercy and grace?

This is such a big lesson, not just for Jonah, not just for Israel, but for us as well, to be careful to not be full of this same pride, a reminder that God’s people are those whom he calls his people, not who we determine are his people. I like to think that we will probably be surprised at who we will meet when we pass into that next life, it Is not for us to know the validity of someones claim, yes there are false believers, yes there are deceivers, and we must be smart in our discernment of such, for we do not want to be caught in a trap and lead astray. But I am hopeful that there will be many who we would judge as being “unworthy” who will be standing at the throne worshiping God with us, and praise God for it for the truth is, none of us are worthy except the Son, who gave of himself on our behalf so that we may be counted as those who are worthy. One example that comes to mind of this, is Jeffery Dhalmer, he supposedly made a profession of faith in prison, is it true? Could he be worshiping at the throne of God? When we think of him, we can be like Jonah and say...wow, after all he has done he doesn’t deserve that, yet, that is the very people that God calls...the undeserving. Maybe he is there, maybe he isn’t, maybe he will be one of the ones who we would be shocked to see...it would be like God to call one such person as a condemnation to the self righteous.

Look at Paul, he was a self righteous proud religious leader in Israel, imprisoning and having Christians put to death, yet God called him. The Thief on the cross, he is not one who was worthy, but he cried out in faith to Jesus who turned and said, Today you will be with me in paradise. We don’t know who God will call, only he knows, so it is not for us to judge, but to preach, we are to proclaim the gospel and it is God who opens the hearts. But we see yet that Jonah has not learned this lesson, as in the account today God again shows him again his provision and mercy by causing a tree to sprout up to shade him, but over night he destroyed it showing his sovereign power and control over something as simple as even a tree.

Yet Jonah responds in anger, he was grateful for the tree, but is again extremely angry when it dies and God compares the tree to the people of Nineveh. Jonah had more compassion upon the tree than he did the people, the people of Nineveh meant less to him than the tree did. He was awaiting their destruction, reveling in the idea of God destroying the entire city. So God caused a tree to spring up, offer him shade for a day, and then die then asks the question...are not the people of Nineveh more valuable than the tree? Jonah labored in Nineveh, he ministered there to the people, he should be praying for God's mercy upon them, that they would turn and repent, but instead he awaits their destruction. The tree, of which he did nothing, he pitied more than the people because it was more important to him than the people. God shows Jonah the nature of his mercy, he gives, and he takes away...he could have destroyed the city just as he caused the tree to die, this was the outcome that Jonah desired...yet he showed mercy upon the people of Nineveh, they heeded the warning, and turned from their evil ways.

This book ends with a question with no answer, but we can answer the question that God poses to Jonah, because again it is the lesson that Jonah was to learn of God's mercy. God responded to Jonah's anger asking, "Should I not pity Nineveh? That great city, in which more than 120,000 persons who can not discern between the right hand and their left- and much livestock?" This statement, can't tell their right from their left I think is an interesting one. It is weird for us to think about God's revelation in the old testament times, as he worked through a few people, such as Noah, or Abraham, which grew into a nation, yet there were still those outside who have only known Israel and her God from afar, this statement not knowing their left from their right I think has to do with their evil life style, they didn't know much different until the message of the Lord came, repent of this evil or perish. Paul says the law was given so that sin became exceedingly sinful, it exposes mankind's sinful nature, it was a revelation from God for the need of a Messiah, but again that revelation was given to Israel, not to other nations. Today, everything is so connected, and information is so readily available the idea that no one knows about God, in at least a basic form is foreign to us, but that was likely not the case here as you would only know what was in your town, or your city with a rare glimpse of information given outside your own area.

God needed a prophet to go and be a witness to Nineveh, for they were ignorant of their sin against a God they did not know. God had compassion upon Nineveh, which is a lesson he tried to teach Jonah through the tree. One of the commentaries I have referenced throughout this study is Jay Sklar on Gospel Coalition's website, he says about this last verse, "God points out that Jonah has compassion upon a simple plant that he did not cultivate or cause to grow and that only lived for a day. If Jonah could have compassion on something so insignificant, should not the Lord have compassion on such a great city?" He goes on to paraphrase this last verse, and writes, "Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in it, these are people who are made in my image. They are utterly lost, with no idea of what is right or wrong, they are like little children who can not tell the difference between their right hand and their left. Even if you do not care about these people, just of all that animals as well! Go ahead, put your plant on one side of a scale, with all these things on the other which is more weightier, which matters more? IF you have felt sorry for this meager and meaningless plant, should I not feel sorry for these people who are made in my own image? Do you not get it Jonah? Are not the animals in the city alone worth more pity than this plant?"

As we see there is no answer to this question, it is left hanging for us to answer. It is the authors way of asking us the reader, that question, challenging us to think if there are any Ninevites in our own lives? Have we happily received mercy and grace from God and yet fail to show it to others? Or maybe even take it a step further and not only fail to show mercy, but have judged them to be unworthy and feel justified in doing so? God is a God of compassion and grace, quick to show mercy, and slow to anger, he relented against Nineveh, a people who were not his people, a city of pagans, a city of gentiles, a city of outsiders who did not know the Lord. So he sent a messenger to tell them of himself, so that they may know, and that they may turn. That is each and every one of us, we are messengers of God's redemption, we ourselves have been given God's mercy in salvation and we are to warn and tell others. This is no longer just a role for the prophets, or the teachers, but for each and every one who claims Christ, as we are to live as reflections of his mercy, and we are to proclaim his grace.

Some argue that this book is a metaphor, a fable and story to teach a lesson, and maybe that is true, we don't know enough about it to make that call really, but whether this is a true account, or an object lesson story makes no difference in the lesson to be learned. God shows us mercy day, by day, and much of it we take for granted because we are likely not even aware of it. A few weeks ago I went into town, ran into a store to pick up an item and came back home, the entire trip took maybe 20 minutes. In the less than 10 minutes I was on the drive back home an accident had occurred on the road I had just driven through...a few minutes could have made all the difference if it was me or not...this is a mercy of God that we don't often think about, his constant protection, we probably aren't even aware of how close we have come to death in our own lives, How can we, who have been shown so much mercy, not likewise show mercy to others? This is the lesson of Jonah, that God is a god of mercy, and he will have mercy on whom he wills, and we are to be faithful messengers of that mercy in the hopes that more will come to know him, that more will turn from their wicked ways and follow Jesus.

This is it folks, we get one chance, Nineveh had one chance, they had 40 days...we have our lifetime how ever long that is, once we pass from this life to the next that is it, so if you are still living in rebellion against God, if you are still living in your sin...turn from it, repent, and follow the God of mercy who is full of compassion and quick to forgive. Our lives are short, and fleeting in the grand scheme of this world, we should make the best of it, and take hold of every opportunity, for there will come a day when we no longer have that opportunity...Nineveh had 40 days, right now is your warning, right now is your 40 day window, repent, believe, and follow Jesus.