

Jonah for Today; A Study in Justice

We've mentioned or discussed the Book of Jonah before in these Sunday School lessons. But I suspect that the Holy Spirit, the Book's ultimate Author, has embedded in the text something compelling that has not yet been uncovered. So let's look at this important Scripture again. In my view, the Book of Jonah adumbrates the very essence of the current Church Age, which we today need desperately to understand better.

The Book of Jonah is unique. Although classified as among the so-called Minor Prophets, it's really a historic parable, totally unlike the oracular prophecies of the other writing prophets. By "historic" I mean that the episode that's narrated really happened in history, probably early in the 8th century BC. By "parable" I mean that it's a teaching device. It uses something concrete and familiar (in this case, a real historic event) to teach something else that's harder to understand. So Jonah is a story from real life that explains or illustrates certain spiritual truths. What I want to do here is discuss them. The book is brief, and I suspect that my readers already know the story; we shouldn't have to review that here. But its brevity obscures its profundity. The lessons of the Book of Jonah are complex in their telling, so I'm going to try to stay focused on God's justice but it's impossible not to stray into other issues. I'm going to leave off the miraculous elements of the story and center on the most serious issue here, the just requirements of God's grace.

Augustine said, "The cost of obedience is nothing compared to the cost of disobedience." The Book of Jonah highlights this truth. But it does more. It is proleptic of God's plan for the Gentile nations and of His intent for the people of Israel in the future. It reveals how God expresses justice. And it makes clear the absolute necessity of the transformation of God's people according to His righteous character. Now, let's unpack all of this.

In my understanding of this story as parable, Jonah represents an embodied Nation of Israel. He is Israel personified. But he's more than that: Jonah is also *us*, people who know the God of Israel, the God of the Bible. He's both Israel and us today, people who have the Scriptures, God's revelation of Himself and His will and who have been informed of God's grace. And Jonah is also in some respects the anticipated Messiah Jesus. Israel's Messiah, after all, is an embodied, personified Nation of Israel. Jesus called Himself a "greater than Jonah." The Ninevites represent not only the Assyrians but also all the Gentile peoples of the world. These are cruel, wicked, idolatrous pagans who have no Scriptures, no revelation of God. They are people whom God centuries earlier abandoned in a state of rebellion. And because of that rebellion they are under judgment, awaiting the day when His terrible wrath will be experienced.

Jonah was God's servant. God gave him a specific commission, something that God wanted done for His great purposes. But Jonah thought better of it and decided not only to ignore the task but, in defiance, to deliberately disobey God. Exactly what Jonah was thinking isn't revealed, but the text implies that he didn't want the Assyrians to be blessed by God in case they should repent. He knew God's character from Scripture. He knew that God is compassionate and shows mercy. He knew that God loves Israel and perhaps he even supposed that, because of that love, his own disobedience would be forgiven. Jonah is selfish and proud. He has no love, he knows nothing of mercy, and he's indifferent to the fate of others. This was no mere failure on his part, Jonah was willfully rebellious. What was the result? Death. God punished him by having him thrown into the sea to die. Disobedience is costly.

The Ninevites had no moral awareness; they were like cattle (4:11). They had no Scriptures, so they knew nothing—*nothing*—about goodness and righteousness. They knew only idolatrous Asshur worship. And violence. They delighted in unspeakably ghastly cruelty. Did the Ninevites deserve mercy? No. But let's also ask, What about Jonah? Did he deserve mercy? No again. We need to think about justice, because God's love and justice are inextricably bound together.

The Book of Jonah is suffused with issues of justice, and we can't pursue them all here. So, for example: Is it just for God to forgive sins if people repent? Was it just for God to threaten the lives of the sailors because of Jonah, and then mercifully save their lives although at Jonah's expense? Was Jonah's anger in Chapter 4 just? Was it just for God to test Jonah? Test Ninevah?

Let's pursue the idea of justice. (a) According to standard notions of justice, we get what we deserve, whether it's punishment for doing wrong or reward for doing right. We humans have the right to choose good or evil, using the measure of free will given us, which means we must be held accountable for our moral choices. Justice demands that. So it's not only just for God to test us, justice *demands* it. And it's God who decides what's right and what's wrong, what's good and what's evil, and in perfect justice He has revealed that to us. (b) Is showing mercy an act of justice or does it violate justice? God is love, but all His works are just (Deuteronomy 32:4b). God is free to show pity on His beloved creatures yet maintain His just character, but a future divine act (the atoning work of the Son) will be necessary. The

salvation of the sailors at Jonah's expense, indeed, the entire story here, anticipates Christ's redemptive work. (c) If God shows mercy to repentant sinners, is it right that there should be no conditions attached? After all, Israel had to obey the Mosaic Law. Or . . . Were there (unstated) expectations? Israel's Law was to make them fit to be in God's holy presence. What about the Ninevites? (d) What made Israel distinct among the nations on earth if, in the end, all nations receive mercy anyway? Would that be just? Jonah couldn't have known what great saving work God had in mind for the future. These questions however may have swirled around in Jonah's mind and led to his (deeply flawed) decision to (so blatantly) disobey God. Even if he couldn't resolve these issues, Jonah (and we) must trust in a good and wise God and always—*always!*—obey Him. The sea obeyed God, the great fish obeyed God, and even the wicked Ninevites obeyed God. Jonah should have obeyed God's commission.

Let's think further about justice. At least the following five eternally valid observations emerge from this Scripture:

1. God punishes wickedness. That's inescapable. All Scripture says so. But there are degrees of culpability. We are responsible for what we know. The Ninevites knew nothing about righteousness, so their culpability was less, way less than Jonah's, because Jonah had Torah plus other Scriptures, all of which we should assume he knew well. We today have even greater revelation from God, and we're therefore held to greater accountability to it. Jonah didn't need to fear the Assyrians, he needed to fear God.
2. God is free to show mercy to those who repent. Jonah repented of his disobedience and was delivered from death. The Ninevites repented too, and were spared destruction. It is God who determines what justice is, and God has decreed that repentance results in mercy. A message of this Book of Jonah (as well as the writings by other prophets) that all commentators readily find is the necessity of repentance for mercy. Why "repentance"? We have been called into the presence of a loving but dangerously holy God, and we must therefore be good, as He is good.
3. The love of God, obedience to God, and the fear of God are all aspects of justice. God's justice pervades every aspect of His creation and controls every relationship. God is a transcendent, infinite Being, and He has revealed Himself to us so we can know Him. He made us, rules us, owns us and will judge us. So it is just that we finite creatures should humble ourselves and love Him, fear Him, and obey Him.
4. All humans are God's handiwork. He's the Creator and loves all His human creatures. He wants to show pity on them. He wants them all to be in relationship to Himself and be blessed. That's justice too. Whether we regard God as transcendent Creator, supreme Ruler, loving Savior, or our heavenly Father, justice demands that we be submissive, and grateful.
5. It is unjust to disobey God. It is unjust to ignore God's revealed will. And it is unjust to presume upon God's love. Jonah did all these, and he deserved what he got, death in the sea. Forgiveness is not automatic, it occurs within a relationship. It creates and maintains a loving, trusting relationship. God will make available in His way, the atonement obtained by the Son, the just basis for forgiveness. Jonah's anger at the end of the story is unjust in the extreme! Jonah had received mercy, and his response should have been (i) to want to share God's mercy and (ii) to be grateful. Three times in Chapter 4 Jonah said he wanted to die; Jonah didn't want to live in God's real world, a world of mingled mercy and justice.

For unrighteous Israel, the message of Jonah was, repent! If the wicked Ninevites, who knew nothing about God but in fear sought to appease Him with repentance, and received mercy, so should the elect people of God. Israel too would receive mercy. But if not, death (destruction and exile) awaited. Israel mustn't presume upon God's having chosen and covenanted with them. See Amos 3:1,2. As God had shown love and mercy to them, Israelites were to have shown love and mercy to Gentiles and taken the knowledge of the Creator God to the Gentile nations. The revelation God had given to Israel (Scripture) was meant to transform them into a holy, loving and righteous people. It didn't, because they didn't have a heart for God. They were always resisting God. Just as Jonah was cast into the sea, where the "sea" in Scripture represents the Gentile nations, so, exile (symbolic of death) would result. But in pity, in the future, as Zechariah (and others) writes, God will restore His beloved people and then, with a new heart for God, they will obediently and lovingly serve Him as intended.

For the Gentiles, the Book of Jonah is equally compelling. The Ninevites were offered an unconditional reprieve from deserved wrath. In fear, they took God at His word regarding the threat of judgment, and they repented. And so the promised wrath was averted. That's how great God's mercy is! But mercy received from God means a godly transformation is the only just response. The Ninevites' repentance was only temporary. They failed to respond to God

in the manner God's justice expects with a deep and enduring change in character and deeds. Later that century, in savage cruelty those Assyrians conquered and destroyed the Northern Kingdom. And God in turn vanquished them. They disappeared from history. See the Book of Nahum. God judged them; they got what they deserved. Wrath. Justice and mercy are not only for Israel but for all nations.

Jonah experienced a resurrection and so will ethnic Israel. So will Israel's Messiah. Jesus fulfilled all that the history of humanity demanded. Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden from God's presence to experience death in exile. God abandoned the Gentile nations to experience death away from His good and loving presence, without even the knowledge of God. All Israel was cast out of the Land and from God's presence to experience death in Exile. The Son then came, taking that entire mass of rebellion upon Himself, suffering the just, punitive death (exile) it all deserved. And then, being resurrected from death, He made possible a new, obedient humanity, one that could be forever in God's presence to be blessed and loved. This radically new kind of existence is freely offered to Jews and to Gentiles, but with the expectation of the response of repentance, that is, transformation into the kind of person God expects of us, as revealed in His Word. The Book of Jonah anticipates this ultimate act of justice.

God has a special relationship with Israel that was to be for the blessing of all people. When Jesus returns, a repentant and transformed Israel will be like Jonah, restored from exile (resurrected from death) to be a witness to all the Gentile nations of the world. It will be glorious. Many expositors refer to the Book of Jonah as a parody, a satire, and to Jonah as the most pathetic of all the prophets. They miss it! This book prophetically anticipates God's great loving and just plan for a future Messianic kingdom that will bring peace and righteousness to all the people on earth.

We today, however, are in the very same situation as Jonah, as Israel, as the Ninevites. God expects obedience from His people, and He will not tolerate disobedience. He will not tolerate our presuming upon His love and willingness to forgive. He has given a commission to us in the Church, and our response, our only response, must be to fulfill it. Indifference to others, indifference to God's love for them and desire to bless them, reflects absence of the transformation that should follow the receipt of mercy. We cannot bask in the gifts and privileges proffered and ignore the responsibilities that attend them. That would violate God's eternal justice. Justice *demands* obedience and radical change as our response to God's mercy.

We're now in a unique, bespoke era, the era of the Son. And in the Gospel, God graciously offers the Gentiles of the world the forgiveness of sins if they repent of their indifference (if not overt hostility) to their Creator. No conditions. Wrath is avoided. But if they accept the offer, they become a new people, a people of God. And God expects of them transformation into a people worthy of that calling. Gentiles who receive Jesus must become obedient as Jonah should have been, as Israel should have been. They must change into a people fit to be in God's holy and glorious presence. Or else. The era is different, but God's expectations are the same.

Let's marvel at God's infinite wisdom. What God does is postpone final judgment until after death. And no one can know apart from God's written revelation what happens after death. This requires His human creatures to believe or exercise trust in the warnings He has given in His Word, and so repent while it's still possible. In God's love, those who heed the warnings are justified by the obedient, righteous life and vicarious sacrifice of the Son. Freed from the guilt of sin, they may enjoy a love relationship with God and receive blessings supernal. Those who, for whatever reason, disregard or reject the warnings forfeit God's love, remain alienated from Him and suffer deserved condemnation. In this way, God is free to love offending creatures while upholding cosmic justice. But what's it mean to "believe"? What's "trust"? Belief in Scripture always results in some action, some change; it involves repentance. Belief (in the sense of trust) establishes a relationship. The loving obedience and radical change resulting from belief makes the invisible relationship a reality. And the change God expects is to become a person who loves as He loves. The issues of justice and mercy in the Book of Jonah reflect God's infinite goodness, love and justice.

The Gospel is Jesus, His Person and work. The Gospel is *everything* Jesus. The Gospel is "good news" because the One who the Scriptures promised would one day come, through whom goodness, mercy and blessing would be freely available, finally came. And so God invites us to enter into a love relationship with Him. Jesus is the most perfect, the most beautiful Person in existence, and He is now exalted beyond anyone's ability to comprehend. We should want to expend our lives seeking to magnify Him. And God is offering in the Gospel vastly more than just the forgiveness of sins. Those who love the Son will experience the blessedness of participating in the coming Messianic Kingdom, of participating in the Godhead for an eternity, and of knowing God intimately and experiencing God's own joy, peace and love. In view of all that God in love wants to bestow on us, let's commit to being and doing in this present life all that God expects as revealed in His Word, for that is our just response.