

Jonah's Anger at God's Mercy

Jonah 3:10-4:1-3

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How amazing it is to see the most holy God show mercy to the undeserving and to the ungodly, while at the same time Christians who have known that same undeserved grace turn around and show anger and frustration at God's rich display of mercy to others. Is there something wrong with that picture? There's certainly nothing wrong with the picture which displays a God who delights to show mercy to the undeserving, but there is something terribly wrong with Christians being vexed with the Lord who showers His mercy even upon the chief of sinners. What hypocrisy for us who know our own sinful hearts so well and who know the undeserved kindness of the Lord in freely forgiving and justifying us on the basis of Christ's death and righteousness alone, and then for us to be vexed and frustrated with the Lord that He has freely chosen to forgive and justify by faith alone those who at one time hated and despised us.

On the one hand, it is very distressing that such hypocrisy and anger towards God could manifest itself in the life of a Christian saved by God's grace, and yet on the other hand, it is very comforting to know that even those prophets and apostles most mightily used by the Lord struggled with like sinful infirmities with which you and I struggle. And the spiritual struggles of the prophets and apostles were hardly minor in nature, ranging from lying in Abraham to save his own neck, adultery and murder in David, gross worldliness in Solomon, overwhelming fear in Elijah as he fled the death-threat of Jezebel, anger and frustration with God in Jonah, doubt in John the Baptist who questioned whether Christ was the Messiah, pride in Peter who said he would never deny the Lord, and a works-righteousness in Peter who by his actions indicated that Gentiles

needed to keep the dietary laws of the Old Testament when he refused to eat with the Gentiles in the Church of Antioch. Dear ones, the list could be expanded greatly, but is it not abundantly clear that the Lord justifies the ungodly and has come to spiritually heal those who are sick with various sinful infirmities? Praise God that He has, for I am among those who stand in continual need of God's mercy as I grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

This Lord's Day we shall look more closely at Jonah's sin, but also at that which occasioned Jonah's sin: namely, God mercifully repenting and turning away His righteous wrath from the great city of Nineveh. Our main points this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Nature Of God's Merciful Repentance In Turning Away His Wrath From The Great City of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10); and (2) The Anger Of Jonah At God For Bestowing His Undeserved Mercy Upon The Great City Of Nineveh (Jonah 4:1-3).

I. The Nature Of God's Merciful Repentance In Turning Away His Wrath From The Great City Of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10).

A. I asked in the previous sermon, "How do we know that the work of the king of Nineveh in his official capacity in promoting the true religion, and the work of the king and of the people in repenting and evidencing their repentance was pleasing to the Lord?" And the answer from our text is found in Jonah 3:10: "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that he had said he would do unto them: and he did it not." Whereas the word of the LORD to Jonah was that God would destroy Nineveh in 40 days (Jonah 3:4), God repented or turned from His wrath when Nineveh turned to the Lord in faith and repentance. But in what sense did God repent?

B. Before considering in what sense God repented (i.e. turned or

changed) in regard to the destruction that Jonah had declared would fall upon Nineveh for her wickedness, let us back up for a moment as we first consider in what sense God cannot repent (turn or change), i.e. in what sense it is impossible for God to repent.

1. One of the essential attributes of the nature of God is that He is immutable or unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth (“I am Jehovah, I change not” Malachi 3:6). The will of God (being one aspect of God’s nature) likewise cannot change (“The counsel of the LORD standeth forever” Psalm 33:11). Therefore, whatever God has predestined or decreed to occur from before the foundation of the world (which is “all things” according to Ephesians 1:11) cannot change (as for example, the elect whom He has chosen to save from before the foundation of the world, Ephesians 1:4-5). Thus, whatever appears to man in this world to be a change in what God revealed He would do (e.g. God, through Jonah, said that He would destroy Nineveh in 40 days, but repented of the judgment upon Nineveh when Nineveh believed and repented of her sin), that so-called change or repenting on the part of God in history was not actually a change in God’s nature or in His eternal plan; for it was decreed to occur from before the foundation of the world. There can be no change in God’s nature, or in God’s eternal plan, for God knows all things and cannot make a mistake due to a lack of knowledge, and God is all wise and cannot make a mistake as to what will glorify His justice and His grace the most in history. Mistakes, errors, and second-guessing cannot fall to God’s account, because all mistakes, errors, and second-guessing are precluded by God’s omniscience, God’s wisdom, God’s holiness, God’s sovereignty, and God’s immutability.

2. Thus, as to God’s nature, God’s will, and God’s eternal plan, God cannot repent or change (“God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent” Numbers 23:19; “And also

the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent” 1 Samuel 15:29).

3. The Westminster Larger Catechism (#12) is very helpful at this point in giving to us an answer to the question, “What are the decrees of God?” “God’s decrees are the wise, free, and holy acts of the council of his will, whereby, from all eternity, he hath, for his own glory, unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time, especially concerning angels and men.”

4. Here, dear ones, are great comforts that we can embrace by faith when we pass through the most trying difficulties that come our way, and even through the valley of the shadow of death.

a. A first comfort: The suffering in our bodies, the estrangement from family and friends, the financial crisis we face, the persecution we face for standing for Christ and His truth, even our sins and failures (like those of Jonah, Peter, and the others mentioned earlier in the sermon) are all appointed by God’s most wise, most holy, and most loving plan from all eternity to glorify His justice and grace, and to benefit His people (how it will benefit you, you may not see, but benefit you it will according to Ecclesiastes 3:11, “He hath made every thing beautiful in his time”; and Romans 8:28, “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose”).

b. A second comfort: God makes no mistakes in what He sends your way. It may appear to be a curse that has landed on your lot without cause (like that of Job), but there is always a reason (and a most wise, most holy, and most good reason) for what God sends our way. We must trust and hope in that truth (because that is who God is), whether we ever come to understand the reason this side of heaven.

c. A third comfort: God can never do you wrong (you whom He has forgiven and justified in Christ). God was not even willing to spare His only begotten Son in order to have you, who trust in Christ, for His own adopted children (“He that spared not his own Son, be delivered

him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things” Romans 8:32). Thus, dear ones, fall upon the character of God, the unchanging character of God when you are perplexed, confused, anxious, or fearful. His promises are only true because of who God is as to His unfailing, immutable character.

C. Now let us consider in what sense our text reveals to us that God repented of the evil that He had spoken concerning Nineveh. Carefully note that the Ninevites hoped in the mercy of God that He would, indeed, repent of His threatened judgment (first mentioned in Jonah 3:9). This was not a vain hope, for Jonah had no doubt preached to them of his own rebellion against God’s revealed will, and how the Lord prepared a great fish to swallow him, but how the Lord in great mercy turned from His Fatherly anger and mercifully delivered him from the belly of the whale. And when Nineveh did trust in the Lord and did turn from their evil ways, the Holy Spirit declares that the Lord repented of the threatened judgment upon Nineveh (secondly mentioned in Jonah 3:10). Then finally, as Jonah is rehearsing to God why he was angry, Jonah states that the reason he rebelled and fled on a ship to Tarshish in the first place was because he knew that the Lord was merciful and repented of threatened evil (or judgment) upon nations, cities, and individuals (thirdly mentioned in Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew that his preaching judgment to the Ninevites might (under the merciful hand of the Lord) actually lead to their salvation, rather than to their judgment (we’ll look more closely at Jonah’s angry and sinful complaint to the Lord in the next main point). And so, how is it that God is said to repent in these three passages just read?

1. First, it does not mean that God has changed in the least in His nature, His attributes, His character, or in His eternal decree, for these cannot change without God ceasing to be God. Rather there is simply a change in the way in which He treats man in accordance with His

own revealed will. Let me explain. God's character is such that He hates unrepentant rebellion, but loves faith and repentance in turning from rebellion. Thus, when individuals or nations turn from unrepentant rebellion to faith and repentance, the change that has occurred (by God's grace) in individuals or nations, calls for God to be consistent with His own moral character and to bless those who trust Him and to repent of the judgment that was previously threatened against them. The change was not actually a change in God (He was simply being true to His unchangeable moral character). The change was actually in man (who was changed by God's grace from a hater of God to a believer in God). In fact, had God threatened judgment upon Nineveh for her unbelief and ungodliness, and had He poured out His fierce judgment upon Nineveh in response to her faith and repentance, this would have surely shown God to be changeable in His character, to be capricious and arbitrary (rather than unchangeable in His moral character). For in such an instance, His moral character would have disapproved of that which is evil (their sins) and also that which is good (their faith and repentance). And so, dear ones, the fact that God threatened judgment upon a wicked city is agreeable to God's moral character of righteousness. And the fact that God repented of the threatened judgment upon a believing and repentant city is agreeable to God's moral character of goodness and kindness. The change was not in God, but in man. God was simply being faithful and true to His unchanging, immutable character (and this is precisely what the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah 18:7-10, which you can look up at your leisure).

2. Dear ones, the fact that God repents of threatened judgment to those who trust Him is our confidence and assurance that God will repent of the eternal judgment threatened against us when we trust in Christ alone as our imputed righteousness before the holy tribunal of God. If the Lord repented of the threatened judgment upon Nineveh before Christ came, how much more shall He repent of the

threatened judgment upon you and me now that Christ has come, has fulfilled all righteousness, and has paid the debt owed to sin for all who will receive and rest in Him. Do you not see in God's repenting of evil against Nineveh, His repenting of evil against you, dear child of God? Oh, glorious truth that is revealed to us for our encouragement and comfort in the faith—God has repented of all evil threatened upon you who receive and rest in Christ alone as your righteousness. Now, dear ones, no evil from God will ever befall you, whether in this life or in the life to come. All difficulties, sufferings, trials, and tribulations that befall you in this life are not evil, but are for your good and for your sanctification and growth in Christ. Rejoice and be glad, dear Christian, for God has repented of all evil against you. He is a reconciled God, and we are His beloved children.

II. The Anger Of Jonah At God For Bestowing His Undeserved Mercy Upon The Great City Of Nineveh (Jonah 4:1-3).

A. What a notable transition we see as we pass from the glories of God's mercy in repenting of the evil that was threatened upon Nineveh (in Jonah 3:10), to the deplorable anger of Jonah directed at the God who delights to show mercy to even the chief of sinners (in Jonah 4:1, "But it [i.e. God's repenting of the threatened judgment against Nineveh—GLP] displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry"). Dear ones, this is not the sin of one who hated and despised the God of our salvation or persecuted the people of God (as did Saul before being smitten from his horse by the Lord on the way to persecute more Christians in Damascus). This is the sinful infirmity of one of the great prophets and types of Christ found in Scripture. Let us briefly consider what brought Jonah to this point of anger, frustration, and despair (even to the point that he preferred to die rather than to live). The answer to what brought Jonah to this point of anger, frustration, and despair to continue living is

inferred from Jonah 4:2: “And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”

1. Jonah had a plan for Israel in his own mind, heart, and ministry—and it didn’t include the salvation of the Gentile city of Nineveh. He had prophesied for some time in Israel concerning her need to turn in faith to the God of her salvation and to repent of her gross apostasy. His whole heart and earnest desire was for the salvation of Israel, God’s covenant people. Note how he speaks of Israel, “Was not this my saying, when I was in MY COUNTRY?” In other words (if I might expand what I believe Jonah is saying in his prayer to God at this point), “Oh God, I was in MY COUNTRY ministering to my kinsmen according to the flesh, thy covenant people, Israel, when I received thy call to go to the Gentile city of Nineveh. And oh Lord, thou hast promised by covenant to save Israel. Therein is the glory of God revealed—in the salvation of thy people, Israel.” Dear ones, I submit that Jonah so closely tied the glory of God in his prophetic ministry to Israel, that he could only see Israel turning to the Lord if the Lord destroyed Nineveh through his prophetic ministry, thus demonstrating to Israel that they alone were God’s people. It would appear that in Jonah’s mind, the salvation of Nineveh would not bring Israel back to the Lord, but rather drive Israel even farther from the Lord. Thus, Jonah prayed to the Lord about his apprehension in going to Nineveh in the first place, for Jonah knew the character of God, that He was gracious, merciful, slow to anger, of great kindness, and repented of threatened judgment where there was faith and repentance in a people. Jonah knew that if he went to preach to Nineveh that God might actually grant to the Ninevites faith in the Lord and repentance from their wickedness, which would so anger Israel that she would flee from the Lord (as Jonah himself fled from the Lord).

2. Not only does this interpretation of the sinful cause of Jonah's anger, frustration, and despair find a reasonable basis from our text in Jonah, but as we look to the New Testament, I believe we find further confirmation of this interpretation as well. For it was with great difficulty that the apostles themselves preached to the Gentiles (Peter needed a vision from God to convince him to go to Cornelius in Acts 10), even though the apostles likewise had the same prophecies that foretold the salvation of all nations and were even commanded by Christ to disciple all nations in Matthew 28:19. In fact, in the city of Antioch, a scandal arose in the church that had the potential to divide the Church of Christ into a Jewish Church and a separate Gentile Church when Peter and others would not eat with the Gentiles, thus indicating by their actions that the Gentiles needed to add to their faith in Christ the dietary laws of the Old Testament if they were to be members in good standing. Paul publicly rebuked Peter, sounding forth the doctrine of free justification by faith alone, apart from any works of the Law (Galatians 2:16). Whatever reluctance Jewish Christians might have had in taking the gospel to Gentiles and in receiving Gentiles into the Church of Christ, the apostle Paul made clear that God's plan was to bring salvation to the Gentiles in order to provoke the Jews to jealousy (Romans 11:11). And God would then out of that jealousy bring all Israel to salvation (Romans 11:25-26). You see, dear ones, Jonah wrongly conceived in his own mind that the salvation of Nineveh and the Gentile nations would dim the glory of God and send Israel fleeing forever from the God of her salvation. However, God's eternal plan was to provoke Israel to jealousy by the salvation of Nineveh (as a preview to the salvation of the nations in the millennium), with the end that "all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26).

3. Dear ones, has such a proud and conceited possessiveness perverted your view of the grace and mercy of God that is in Christ Jesus? Have you looked at others or treated others as if they were undeserving of the kindness of God which you have received (though you and I are

every bit as undeserving as the most heinous sinner on the face of the earth)? Spiritual pride, beloved, has no place in the lives of us who call ourselves Christians or Covenanters, who know how foolish we are by nature, how prone to error we are by nature, and how given to follow the lusts of the flesh we are by nature. If we truly understand our own natural depravity and corruption, if we truly see with horror how often we offend our holy God by our daily transgressions, then we of all people must be humbled before God that He would use us to reach out to others with the gospel of salvation and with the covenanted truths of reformation. If we are to boast, let us boast in Christ and in His gospel that is freely offered even to us who are the chief of sinners.

B. But also note, dear ones, how when Jonah's plan to glorify God through the destruction of Nineveh did not work out (but God did the opposite in saving Nineveh), Jonah became vexed, frustrated, very angry, and despaired of life.

1. Jonah, indeed, remembered that God was gracious, merciful, and repented of threatened judgment where there was faith and repentance, but Jonah had forgotten that God was most wise, most holy, and had a right to do with His creatures as He knew would glorify Him most. And because Jonah lost sight of God's wisdom and sovereign control, Jonah proudly conceived he had a better plan than God. Because Jonah had placed his hope in his own plan (rather than trusting in God's most wise, most holy, and most sovereign plan), he became angry at God and even thought he would be better off dead than live with this great disappointment.

2. Lest we be too quick to pour all our condemnation upon Jonah's anger, frustration, and despair, let us understand that this was the struggle of a faithful and true servant of the Lord. Though we cannot commend or approve of Jonah's behavior here, we cannot be too hard on him without being equally hard upon ourselves (for all the times we have

done the same thing when our preconceived ideas, as to how God would be most glorified in various situations did not work out). How many times have we become angry and despaired of life because we thought God would be most glorified in saving that loved one right now, in restoring that backslidden brother/sister right now, in healing me immediately, in providing wisdom about an important decision now, in providing for my needs now. But how often the Lord does not choose to glorify Himself as we had conceived or according to our timetable, and we become angry, frustrated, cast down (like Jonah).

3. Dear ones, there is one thing I pray you will do that Jonah did, and that is that you will not flee from the Lord, but rather flee to the Lord in prayer. Pour out your heart to the Lord (not in anger, frustration, or despairing of life as did Jonah), but rather pour out your heart to the Lord recalling His mercy, His grace, His kindness, but also His wisdom (which prevents Him from making a single mistake or error), His love (that has ordained this for your good rather than for your evil), and His sovereignty (wherein He has the right to choose that plan that glorifies Him the most).

4. Dear ones, have you (like Jonah) tied the glory of God to His working by this one plan alone that you have conceived in your own mind? Have you put God into your little box, and in effect, required that He work according to your plan? The sovereign Lord who is most wise will not be so confined by what we think would bring Him the most glory? So much of our own restlessness, anxiety, anger, and frustration is due to the fact that God has chosen to glorify Himself by a plan that we did not conceive and did not like. But that is His right. In pouring out our hearts to the Lord, God help us to fall upon the mercy, the wisdom, the love, and the sovereignty of God who makes no mistakes and can do us (who are His beloved children by faith alone) no wrong.

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