

The other day I was talking about the Hallmark Channel, where every story seems the same. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl – usually because the boy did something really stupid, but in the end, the boy gets the girl. That’s the typical Hallmark story and people love it. We love a good story. We love happy endings where everything seems to work out according to plan – just like they were supposed to all along.

In the story of Jonah, so far, everything seems to be working out according to God’s plan.

God called Jonah to go to the wicked people in Nineveh.

Jonah runs away from God – he does not like “those” people, so he books a Mediterranean cruise to Tarshish Spain.

God sends a terrible storm that surprises the crew and batters the ship.

Everybody becomes a prayer warrior but Jonah. He’s not praying.

With a roll of the dice – Jonah is singled out by God as the culprit who caused the storm.

The sailors reluctantly throw Jonah overboard into the sea at Jonah’s request.

The storm immediately stops.

The pagan sailors, now acting like saints, worship the God of Jonah.

Jonah, who is acting like a sinner, is dog paddling in the water and looks a lot like a fishing lure.

God sends a great fish to swallow Jonah, not to chew on Jonah – that’s crucial.

Jonah spends three days and three nights in the great fish for a time out.

Jonah is projectile vomited onto the shore by the fish.

Eventually, Jonah goes to Nineveh.

He delivers a very short doom and gloom message – essentially saying, “You people are toast in 40 days.” That’s it.

The whole city repents.

God spares them all.

It’s the greatest revival in history.

If the book of Jonah would have ended at **Chapter 3**, Jonah might have been considered one of the greatest prophets, even though he had a rocky start. He could have gone back to Israel and said, *“Everybody, you are not going to believe this! The whole city of Nineveh turned from their wicked ways and turned to God – the whole city, the king, everybody, even the animals fasted and wore sackcloth. It was so crazy!”*

Surely, after what Jonah had experienced in Nineveh, he would be on “Cloud 9.”

Well, turn with me to **Chapter 4** and let’s see how it went for Jonah.

¹But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.

So, that which pleased God – greatly displeased Jonah. Jonah was disgusted at what just happened, in fact, to be “**greatly displeased**” suggested that Jonah considered God’s mercy to the Ninevites as being a great evil. God had turned from His anger and Jonah became angry as a result. This word for “**angry**” is burned. We might say that Jonah was hot, he was fuming because he felt that what had just occurred was completely wrong of God.

Jonah did not get his way, he was not in agreement with God, but fortunately for Jonah, he prayed to God this time instead of running from Him.

²He prayed to the Lord and said, “Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this, I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.”

Jonah is candid with God in his prayer. While I don’t think it’s in one’s best interest to disagree with God – it is important to be real and honest with Him. So, Jonah comes right out and says it – *“I’m angry Lord, because I knew what You would do. I knew that You are forgiving and gracious and compassionate, and now look what has happened. I knew this would happen and this is precisely why I took off in the first place. This is why I ran from You. I knew You would not destroy them if they turned to You. I knew it!”*

Jonah’s theology is absolutely right, but his heart is absolutely wrong! He’s a walking double standard.

Jonah was happy when he was delivered in the sea after his disobedience, but he did not want to see the Ninevites delivered. Jonah had received God’s compassion, but he had no compassion for “those” people. Jonah knew God was willing to forgive but he didn’t want the Ninevites to know it – hence his short doom and gloom message – *“You people are toast in 40 days.”* Jonah knew God’s character, in fact, his prayer to God was similar to how God described Himself in **Exodus 34** when He passed by Moses. God said of Himself beginning in **verse 6**:

“The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”

As a prophet to Israel, Jonah was familiar with Scripture and the stories of Israel's own wicked past – we got a taste of that in our study through Judges. Jonah knew all too well the sinfulness of God's chosen people – how many times they had turned their backs on God, and how many times after they repented that God took them back and gave them another chance. Jonah himself was given a second chance, so he is a walking contradiction – but I guess anger has a way of blinding us to our own sin. Some of you are angry people who do not see your own shortcomings and you miss out of God's blessings. Jonah should be rejoicing at this great miracle, he was in the middle of it, but in his anger, he was completely blinded to it – he missed it. And I guess anger also blinds us to our own double-standards. God's mercy and grace is awesome when it's undeservingly directed toward us, but it's despised when directed toward those *we think* do not deserve it. Jonah could not stand it, so he says in **verse 3**:

“Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.”

Well, doesn't this sound familiar? He wants to die again. If you recall back in Chapter 1, Jonah told the sailors to toss him overboard into the sea as it appeared, he would rather die than obey God.

So, in essence, what Jonah is saying is this: *“I'd rather be dead than to live in a world where my enemies are followers of God and my God is merciful to my enemies.” “I know You are a God of love, but love has its limits. Some people, like those Ninevites, are not supposed to be loved.”*

Here we see Jonah's true colors really coming out. His hatred against the Ninevites had been peeking out in the story but here it is in plain view.

Writer Anne Lamott said, *“You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”*

Obviously, Jonah does not share God's heart for a lost and dying world, and he tells God – *“I can't deal with it, just kill me.”* But God is still so patient with His prophet.

⁴The Lord said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?”

In other words, “Jonah, what right do *you* have to be angry?”

Yes, the people of Nineveh were wicked. Yes, they were evil. Yes, they had sinned Jonah, **but ultimately, sin is against who?** Sin is against God. Sometimes we forget that. They hadn't sinned against Jonah – they had sinned against God. Jonah had no right to be angry.

If we think about it a bit, God had every right to be angry towards Jonah and kill him for his disobedience. In fact, God had more right to be angry at Jonah than He did the Ninevites because Jonah knew what God required and he chose to disobey God anyway. On the other hand, the Ninevites did not know, and although they were wicked, they were ignorant of God's requirements. But, now that they know, they have repented of their sin and turned to God.

God asked a question, but Jonah does not answer. **So, what does Jonah do instead?** Look at **verse 5**.

Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.

Jonah stomps out of the city in a huff, builds a shabby shelter likely on a high spot, unfolds his lawn chair, and waits for the fireworks. He is still hoping for the best, that God is going to change His mind and at the end of 40 days – just kill them all. If he's lucky, maybe the people will backslide and get what's coming to them after all. He's keeping hope alive – it's hope, but a terribly twisted hope.

⁶So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.

This is the desert, so there aren't a lot of trees or places to find shade. And it's hot, Jonah didn't bring sun screen, and I guess his shelter wasn't very helpful in keeping the sun out. But, out of nowhere a huge plant springs up, so big that it provides the much-needed shade to Jonah. This is grace upon grace upon grace towards Jonah.

So, when this plant grows up, Jonah sees it as a blessing from God – it becomes an object of Jonah's comfort and affection. Maybe he's thinking it's all good now between himself and God, but it's not. God is still trying to get through to Jonah – to change his heart.

⁷But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. ⁸When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life." ⁹Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?**" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."**

Well, that plant didn't last long. It's dead and Jonah is baking in the sun again. So, God asks Jonah another question, but this time the question is not about the

people of Nineveh, but it's about the plant. **Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?"** And Jonah responds that he is so angry, he wants to die – again.

And why does he want to die this time?

Jonah liked the plant, it was good, and he wanted to enjoy its comforting shade, but God sent a worm that destroyed the plant, and on top of that, God sent a scorching east wind that caused great discomfort.

I couldn't help but notice that word "**appointed.**" We have seen it often. God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. God appointed a plant to provide shade, God appointed a worm to eat the plant and God also appointed a hot wind to cause discomfort. All of this came from God – the comfort and the discomfort. This was all part of God's purpose and plan to change the heart of Jonah.

¹⁰ Then the Lord said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. ¹¹Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

God tells Jonah, *"Let's compare our two situations."* *"Jonah, you watched a plant get eaten away and got all worked up with concern and pity. Now this plant just came to you. It appeared one night and it was gone the next. You did not labor for it like a gardener. You did make it grow, you put absolutely no effort into it and yet you loved it and wanted it to survive. That's your situation Jonah. Now consider Mine for a moment. If you loved the plant that much, **can't I love a people who do not know Me?**"*

So, here sits this "prophet of God" on the outskirts of town – an angry brat who did not get his way. Jonah was willing to have compassion on a plant, but not on people or even animals. And in this passage God mentions 120,000 people **who do not know the difference between their right and left hand.** God could be referring to the children in Nineveh or He could be describing the people of Nineveh as "kindergarteners" when it comes to their knowledge about the one true God. In other words, the people were morally and spiritually naïve – not innocent – but naïve.

Jonah's priorities are completely backwards and we are left with a clear contrast between the ways of God and the ways of Jonah. **Jonah doesn't appear to care about what God cares about** – and this is a statement against Israel, and it's a message for you and me as well.

The heart of Jonah's problem – was his heart, and it needed to change.

And with that, the story ends and we are kind of left hanging here because we don't get an answer from Jonah. We don't know if God eventually got through to Jonah. We don't know if Jonah had a change of heart.

But maybe the story is left open-ended for those of us who read it to answer for ourselves a couple of questions.

What does God care about? What do I care about? Do these cares match?

These are questions that must be asked and answered – especially in these days and times. **Am I focused on the kingdom of God? Is my prayer "Lord, Your will be done" or am I focused on my own kingdom and my will?** I fear that the latter is more likely the case for many.

What does God care about? What do you care about? Do these cares match?

Now back to the story. I would like to think that Jonah repented in the end. I like a happy ending just like other people, and like Paul Harvey might say, maybe there is more to the rest of the story.

I was reading my Hailey's Bible Handbook which is a neat little resource with all kinds of interesting information in it – and this is something I read:

"The second largest mound in the ruins of Nineveh (present day Mosul, Iraq) is called Tell Nebi Yunus, or translated the "Hill of the Prophet Jonah." "Yunus" is the native word for "Jonah." The mound covered 40 acres and was 100 feet high. It reportedly contained the tomb of Jonah. The tomb was so sacred to the natives that no large-scale excavation had been permitted in the mound."

I did a little more digging and I found a news article. On July 24, 2014, the media reported that ISIS had destroyed the centuries-old Tomb of Jonah in Mosul, Iraq.

Present-day Mosul encompasses the site of the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh, where, the Bible teaches, Jonah preached. Although this is disputed, a tradition holds that Jonah was buried within the city.

An Assyrian church stood over the tomb for centuries. After the Muslim conquest, the church became a mosque; the structure that ISIS destroyed dated to the 14th century. In addition to the tomb, the mosque once held the supposed remains of the fish that had swallowed Jonah, including one of its teeth.

Over the years, the remains of the fish dwindled to a single tooth, and then even that relic disappeared. In 2008, the U.S. Army presented the Imam with a museum quality replica of a sperm whale tooth to take its place.

Now there are other reputed locations of the tomb of Jonah; however, don't you find this interesting? What might that suggest if Jonah was actually buried in Nineveh and the site was considered sacred?

Maybe, at the end, Jonah did change his heart and endeared himself to the people of Nineveh, so much so, that he lived there, eventually died there, and was honored there.

As I said from the beginning, this story was about God, and what did we learn about God?

- God is sovereign. He will accomplish His purposes and plans.
- God's ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts.
- God is extremely gracious and compassionate and forgiving. He's a God of second chances, and third chances, and so on and so on.
- God rescues and spares people, even wayward people. God was willing to rescue and spare Jonah. God was willing to rescue and spare the pagan sailors. God was willing to rescue and spare the people of Nineveh. God is willing to rescue and spare you and me, but He could not rescue and spare His own Son because of you and me.

And what does this story say about you and me? Or, let me ask the question another way. Who was the problem in this story? Was it the pagan sailors? No, as soon as they experienced the truth, they worshipped Jonah's God. Was it the wicked Ninevites? No, as soon as they heard the truth – they repented and believed in Jonah's God.

Who was the problem in this story? The consistent problem throughout the entire story was Jonah – a man who knew God. Jonah wanted his own way and he fought God all the way. Maybe the problem in our community, maybe the problem in our world is not so much the people who do not know God, but like Jonah – it's the people who do. Maybe, it's the Christian who only wants to obey God on his or her own terms. Maybe, it's the Christian who lives in blind anger, oblivious to the work that God is doing around them. Maybe, it's the Christian who does not see that his or her sin is actually a sin against God Himself. Maybe, it's the Christian who does not care about what God cares about.

What does God care about? What do you care about? Do these cares match?

Source Material:

Holman Old Testament Commentary – Max Anders
Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe
The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Walvoord & Zuck
Enduring Word – David Guzik