

# THE PROPHECY OF JONAH

## Chapter 4

Family Camp – August 21, 1997

Probably all of us would have liked this Prophecy of Jonah if the story had ended with chapter 3. There we had the opportunity of seeing how Jonah had been restored to fellowship with the Lord, and how he had obediently gone to Nineveh. There he saw what surely must be the greatest movement of the Spirit of God ever. Even on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 there were only 3,000 saved. I say “only” even though I have been stirred to the depths in my own heart many times as I have read that account of the coming of the Spirit, and the blessing that followed. But 3,000 is very small by comparison with a possible 600,000 who were saved in Nineveh. Judgment upon that wicked city of Nineveh was averted as the prophet preached, and as God manifested His saving grace and power in transforming cruel, wicked Ninevites, into the children of God. If the book had ended with chapter 3 we would have put it down feeling that at last all was well.

But all was not well. Jonah had come back to the Lord, but the attitude in his heart had not changed even though it was evident that God had done a mighty work in many hearts. And so instead of learning that Jonah was going to stay in Nineveh for a time to make sure that the new converts were well established in the truth, that he was teaching them how to pray and how to walk with God, we see to the contrary a very angry prophet! He was not only “very angry,” but he was “displeased...exceedingly.” These words clearly indicate that Jonah was *furiosus*—furious with God! All of the hatred that had been in his heart toward the Ninevites was still there. He was not a true missionary. He was not a true evangelist. He is the example of a man who was outwardly obedient, and whose message was true, but whose heart was not right. We could not see that in chapter 3, but the Lord Who is never ignorant of anything, knew that there was yet more work to do in the heart of his servant.

Isn't this often the case with us that most things are right in our relationship with the Lord, but not everything. God wants everything to be right. Jonah had experienced the grace of God in chapter 2, but he needed to drink more deeply of that grace. In fact, he had to be grateful for the grace that God exercised toward him, but he deeply resented what God in His grace had done for the Ninevites. Many expositors have recognized that Jonah was similar to the unjust servant the Lord told about in Matt.18:23-35. His master forgave him 10,000 talents, but he would not forgive his fellow servant who owed him 100 pence.

But in his anger we do see that Jonah turned to the Lord in prayer. He seemed to justify the feelings he had back in chapter 1, and also to justify his attempt to get to Tarshish, at the same time in his “hot” anger he was practically charging God with doing the wrong thing in forgiving the Ninevites. We want the grace of God for ourselves, but somehow we feel differently when God is gracious to those we may not like. If it had not been for the attributes which Jonah rehearsed before the Lord, the situation with Jonah would have been very different.

Look at the way Jonah described God.

He is “a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger (which Jonah was not), and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.” How thankful we can all be that God is the kind of a God He is. If God did not possess these glorious attributes, there would be no hope for any sinner. But instead of rejoicing in what God is, Jonah made his request in verse 3. (Read.) How pathetic was the condition of this servant of the Lord. He had so much to rejoice about, but he was robbing himself of that blessing because of the hardness of his own heart.

If the Lord had struck Jonah dead on the spot, we probably would not be very surprised. Just like when you

read the account of the children of Israel in their journey from Egypt to Canaan, we all have to marvel that God did not destroy the whole nation and start over with Moses, as He said on one occasion He was going to do. But then, when we look at our own lives we see many reasons to marvel at the Lord's patience and His grace with each one of us. Sometimes we have reason to be thankful that the Lord does not answer our prayers. God didn't answer this request for Job, and neither did He answer this request for Elijah.

In the case of Jonah, what did the Lord do? He asked Jonah a simple, but very heart-searching question: "Doest thou well to be angry?"

There are times when it is wrong not to be angry. There are even times when God is angry. But it is not "well" to be angry when God transforms the lives of sinners. Jonah's heart was so full of prejudice against the Ninevites that he could not see the benefit which even Israel would experience because of what God had done in Nineveh. We are not told that Jonah answered the question, but we can be sure that it made him think. And possibly it even calmed him down from the anger that is described in verse 1 of this chapter. Instead Jonah left the city of Nineveh where he had expressed himself so strongly to God, made himself a shelter, and looked to see what might become of the city.

This seems to indicate that Jonah thought that even after all that had taken place, the Lord might still destroy the city. Expositors argue about whether or not this was before or after the forty days. It seems to me that it would fit in better if it were during the forty days. But that is beside the point. Perhaps Jonah had put his own interpretation upon the question that the Lord had asked him, and had taken it to mean, "Why are you angry when I still intend to destroy the city?"

However that may be, the Lord exercised his grace toward Jonah and He sovereignly "prepared a gourd." I don't think we are to assume that Jonah knew that this was something that the Lord did especially for him. But we are to assume that the Lord did this in just the same way that the Lord had "prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah" at the end of chapter 1. It was not just by chance that that fish came by and swallowed Jonah. The Lord sent the fish at just the right time to save Jonah from drowning. And with all of the controversy that has raged through the years about that "great fish," and whether or not a whale is capable of swallowing a man, the word "prepared" might very well indicate that the Lord made a special edition of a "great fish" which was capable of swallowing Jonah.

In the same way, this gourd did not just grow right there by Jonah's shelter at that particular time; God planted it. This was a plant called a *palma-christi* which is sometimes called a castor oil plant. It grows rapidly to eight to ten feet. There is only one leaf on each branch, but the leaves are usually a foot across. And so a grown plant can provide good shelter from the heat. However, it dies quickly when it is injured in any way. Jonah's gracious God was being very gracious to him. And it is very likely that when we read that "the Lord God made it to come up over Jonah," that this, too, was another miracle which the Lord performed for the benefit of Jonah. Needless to say, now Jonah was "exceeding glad," just as he had been exceedingly angry. But the text does not indicate that he recognized the hand of the Lord in this, or that God had done something special for him.

All of this was to teach Jonah a lesson.

The next day a worm which the Lord had "prepared," attacked the plant, and killed it. At the same time "God prepared a vehement east wind" (another special act of God), and Jonah who had been so comfortable as he waited to see what God might do to the city, now became so miserable that he wanted to die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." And then another question came from the Lord.

The question that the Lord asked this time was, “Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?” This meant that Jonah was now angry on behalf of the gourd because the worm had attacked it, and killed it, and then the east wind came up to make Jonah’s discomfort greater than it had been before the gourd grew up. *In other words, Jonah was exercising compassion toward the gourd!*

Jonah was not about to admit his folly, but said, “I do well to be angry, even unto death.” This led to question #3. (Read verses 10 and 11.)

Jonah had shown compassion for the gourd. But he had not planted it, nor watered it, nor nourished it. It came up one night, and was gone the next. And Jonah, amazingly, how shown more compassion for that plant, which he had nothing to do with, than he had manifested toward all of the living beings in Nineveh. You talk about majoring in minors, that is what Jonah had done. *Blinded by his own prejudice a plant meant more to him than a person!* Jonah needed to have his thinking straightened out. He needed to have his mind renewed!

Now for the question. (Read verse 11.)

In contrast with Jonah’s relationship with the gourd (which was nothing), the Lord had brought those Ninevites into existence. He had provided for them. He had made them the great city that they were, and, although He was not responsible for their sin, we know that they achieved their greatness only by His blessing (which they did not recognize). But more than this, since God had done a saving work in their hearts, this would mean that they had been chosen to be saved before the foundation of the world. In a special sense, a redemptive sense, although they were not Jews, they were the people of God. And the Lord had brought them to Himself through the preaching of Jonah.

Besides, notice the reference to the numbers here: “Sixscore thousand persons.” A score is twenty. Sixscore then is 120, and so “sixscore thousand persons” means 120,000 persons. What about these persons he was speaking about? The Lord said that they could not “discern between their right hand and their left.”

Do you remember how old you were when you could tell your parents what was your right hand, and what was your left hand? I thought we might get some of our younger children up here and ask them to show us their right hand and their left hand, but I will let you parents who have young children run that experiment yourselves. Generally this is taken to mean children 3 and under. Now if your child is a little older, and still does not know which hand is which, don’t worry. They will learn that in due time. *But do you see what God was saying?”*

He was saying that there were in the city of Nineveh a large number of children who did not have the discernment to tell their right hand from their left. They, too, were sinners. They were born in sin, but they had not yet come to the place where they were involved in the sins which their parents were known for. I don’t think that the Lord was speaking of what is sometimes called “the age of accountability,” but He was speaking about the importance of reaching the children while they are still very young and before their lives have become corrupted by the sin that is in their own hearts. What a passage this is for evangelizing children! Those of us who have had parents who knew the Lord, and who taught us, and prayed for us, and told us about our need for a Saviour, have very, very much to be thankful for because of God’s grace to us. And it is based upon this number of young children that expositors and theologians have come up with the figure that there had to be more than a half a million people in Nineveh, and so probably 600,000 is a good estimate!

Have you notice (I’m sure you have) that sin is making its way into the lives of children at younger and younger ages? Children who are not even in their teens are engaging in sexual immorality. It is because as a nation we have turned against the Lord, and we are reaping the harvest of our godlessness in many ways. But one of the

most tragic ways is in the way it is affecting the lives of our children.

And so the Lord was saying to Jonah, “If you can’t rejoice because of what I have done in the hearts of those formerly wicked Ninevite adults and young people, think of what it will mean in their lives of their children who may never be guilty of the sins of their parents because their parents have heard the Gospel from your mouth, and their lives have forever been changed. Once they were godless and wicked and cruel; now they have become children of God by the grace of God..”

The prophecy ends with, “and also much cattle.” Those of you who were here this morning notice, I hope, that when the king of Nineveh issued his edict, it included not only the people, but also their animals. Their animals were a vital part of their wealth as well as of their livelihood. For the animals to be brought expressed the total dedication of the people to the Lord. And here at the end of the prophecy the Lord was indicating to Jonah that when people come to the Lord, even their animals benefit from it.

I am not saying that animals are to be saved like we are, but I am saying that all of creation has felt the dreadful effects of sin. This is what the Apostle Paul was speaking about when he wrote the eighth chapter of Romans where we have these words:

Rom 8:18-25

18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

20 For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope,

21 Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

23 And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

24 For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?

25 But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

Now let me summarize the main lessons for Jonah chapter 4.