

The Lessons That Jonah Needed to Learn

Jonah 4:9-11

Jonah 4:9-11 - *“Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “It is right for me to be angry, even to death!”¹⁰ But the Lord said, “You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night.¹¹ And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?”*

Background Notes

The book of Jonah ends abruptly, with a question from God to Jonah. This question summed up the lessons that God was trying to teach Jonah. *“And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?”* (v11). Most likely God had the children of Nineveh in mind when He mentioned the 120,000 persons who couldn’t discern between their right and left hands. This means that the population of Nineveh was at least 600,000 people – and that’s why God called it a “great city.”

How did Jonah answer God’s final question? When God asked, “Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city,” we believe Jonah answered it with a “Yes!” In essence, Jonah’s reply was, “Yes, Lord – it’s right that you should pity Nineveh. It’s my attitude that has been wrong. I’ve been immature and selfish and short sighted!”

How can we say for sure that Jonah learned his lesson and had changed in his attitude? Because we believe that Jonah himself was the author of the book! Hebrew tradition has always held that Jonah wrote the book of Jonah. How could Jonah possibly have written this book (especially chapter 4), if he hadn’t changed in his attitude toward Nineveh? He had changed his attitude, and he wrote the book as a testimony to the grace of God!

Jonah wrote the book, not only to tell his own story, but as a rebuke to the northern kingdom of Israel. Under King Jeroboam II, the rebellious northern kingdom was proud because of its accomplishments and its prosperity. Israel had even reclaimed some of the land it had lost to Assyria, in fulfillment of the Jonah’s prophecies (see 2 Kings 14:25).

But despite their prosperity and success, the people of Israel had not turned back to the Lord. Israel was not the “light to the Gentiles” that God wanted her to be. So Jonah wrote this book as a rebuke to Israel. Nineveh, that great city of the pagan Gentile Assyrian Empire had turned from their wicked ways and repented. (Although Nineveh did not technically

become the capital of Assyria for another sixty years, the king lived there, and it was a very large city.) And the whole city responded to the grace of God and repented, and God withheld His promised judgment.

But unlike Nineveh, Israel did not respond to the grace of God, and therefore the coming judgment was not removed from Israel. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC, about 35-40 years after Jonah wrote his book. Thus the book of Jonah was a rebuke to the nation of Israel.

This rebuke wouldn't have made Jonah a very popular prophet in his old age. In his younger days Jonah had been a very popular prophet. He had predicted prosperity - and his prediction came true! But after writing his book, Jonah would have been less popular, because it was clear that his book was a rebuke to the nation of Israel.

But Jonah had learned his lesson, and he was no longer the proud, selfish and narrow-minded prophet who fled to Tarshish. No! He was now willing to speak out against Israel. Jonah had changed. He had come to appreciate the wideness of God's mercy.

Studying the book of Jonah should have this effect on us as well. We should learn to appreciate and rejoice in the wideness of God's mercy.

Doctrinal Points

1. God is more concerned about people than plants!

God had to ask Jonah if he had a good reason to be angry - **twice!** *"Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" (v9). Notice Jonah's answer: "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"*" At this point Jonah was still like the pouting child having a temper tantrum.

But notice the grace of God as He reasoned with Jonah. God didn't shout Jonah down, and He didn't say, "You've got **no** good reason to be angry!" No! *"... the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?" (v10-11).*

In essence, God was saying: "Jonah, why are you so uptight about a plant? Give me one good reason! It's not your plant. You didn't make it. You didn't buy it. You didn't even spend any time cultivating it. Can't you see that you're being selfish and shortsighted and immature? You're concerned about a plant - but you're not the least bit concerned about perishing people. People are far more important than plants! Jonah - please grow up! Get the big picture. I'm concerned

about people. I made them. I love them. I don't want them to perish! Just think of the children. Where's your pity? You're not even concerned about the animals that would perish. How can you be so selfish and self-centered?"

What a lesson for us! So often we're like Jonah – selfish and shortsighted! We're more concerned about maintaining the comforts of life that God has given us than about the lost people around us. Maybe we think we're not as bad as Jonah, but think again. I know Christians who are *literally* more concerned about the special plants in their gardens than about the lost people around them.

Many of you have pets. Suppose you were given this option: you could see one of your lost neighbors come to Christ - but you would have to give up your favorite pet. Sounds like a silly little illustration, but it exposes our true hearts, doesn't it? Unfortunately, we're like Jonah. We're selfish and shortsighted. We literally cry when the Lord chooses to take away some of the comforts of life that He's given us – but do we cry about the lost condition of our neighbors and co-workers?

That's the lesson Jonah had to learn, and that's the lesson all of us need to learn. God is far more concerned about people than plants!

2. God is more concerned about compassion than condemnation.

Ezekiel 33:11 says: *"As I live," says the Lord God, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from his way and live."* And 2 Peter 3:9 says: *"God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."*

God is more concerned about compassion than condemnation. Jonah had to learn this lesson, because Jonah was more concerned about condemnation than compassion. Jonah was convinced that God would never show compassion to the cruel pagan Gentile Assyrians - but Jonah was wrong! He had to learn the truth of Romans 3:29: *"Or is the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also."*

But even when Jonah learned the truth that God wanted to show compassion to the pagan Gentile Assyrians, he didn't like it! Jonah had to learn the hard way that God desires to show compassion to people. He doesn't want to condemn people. God graciously disciplined Jonah until he learned that lesson in his own life. He finally learned this truth through the object lessons of the plant, the worm and the wind.

Have we learned this lesson yet? Do we realize that God is more concerned in compassion than condemnation? Is there a "Nineveh" to which God wants **you** to go? Remember, our "Ninevehs" are people and places for which we don't have much compassion - in fact we don't much care that they're under the judgment of God! Maybe we're even glad that some of these "Ninevehs" are under the judgment of God.

But God cares! And the “Ninevehs” are there. In line with the Great Commission, God may ask us to go to places and do some things we really don’t want to do - in order to show His compassion. Showing God’s compassion to the “Ninevehs” in our lives will involve stepping out of our comfort zone. Sharing with our “Ninevehs” may involve some risk - but let’s not fear our “Ninevehs” more than we trust our God! Let’s not be more concerned about our physical welfare than the spiritual welfare of lost people. We need hearts of compassion for the lost.

Over and over again in the gospels we read that our Lord was “moved with compassion” for the lost. Are we? At the present time, two of my students (a married couple) are interested in going to New Guinea as missionaries when they finish their Bible college studies. I asked them, “Why New Guinea?” - and they said that the Lord had given them a special concern and compassion for the lost people of New Guinea!

Folks, the lost people of our “Ninevehs” are out there – our lost neighbors, our lost colleagues at work, the lost people around the world. They’re under condemnation because of their sin. Do we care? God is more concerned about compassion than condemnation.

Practical Application

Let God have the last word!

As we come to the end of our study of the book of Jonah, we should be encouraged! The book ends with Jonah as a re-commissioned prophet, and a prophet whose heart had been so changed that it was fully in line with the heart of God. Jonah finally let God have the last word!

At the beginning of the book, Jonah would not even give God his hands for service - he fled to Tarshish. Then after his lesson in the storm and the great fish, Jonah gave God his hands - but not his heart. Finally - after the lessons of the plant, the worm and the wind - Jonah gave God his whole heart. Finally, Jonah let God have the last word! At the very end of the book, Jonah no longer questioned God’s ways. He was letting God do the talking.

The patriarch Job finally came to the same place. In the last chapter of his book, Job had finally allowed God to have the last word. He no longer questioned God’s ways.

Have we come to the place in our lives where we no longer question God’s ways? Does God “have the last word” in our lives? Giving our whole heart to God may take a lifetime, but here’s the good news - ***just as God never gave up on Jonah, so God will never give up on you!***

Where are you right now? Are you like Jonah at the beginning of the book, or are you like Jonah at the end of the book?

Let God have the last word!