

THE CALL OF JONAH **(“Should I Not Pity Nineveh...?”)**

Jonah 1-4

Key Verses: 3:1-2, “Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’”

4:11a, “And should I not pity Nineveh...?”

I have a question for you: What do you care about? There are superficial cares like what you will spend time looking at on the internet, like the Olympics or a Netflix series. There are deeper concerns that you will spend time, money, and dedication on, like diet, exercise, hobbies, education, your children’s future, or your career advancement.

Let me ask you a more serious question: Who do you care about? For most people it would be a relative, like a parent, a sibling, a child, or grandchildren. For others it could be your best friend. For some, their friends seem to be more important than their family members.

Our cares are quite self-serving or self-centered, since they have to do with us getting something out of it. Concerns that do not benefit us are usually of little concern to us. In fact, there is a rude saying, “Ask me if I care.” It means, “Don’t tell me about that, because I really don’t care.” (Do you ever feel like that?) In the story of Jonah we can see what God cares about or is concerned about.

The book of Jonah is a poetic, powerful, profound and practical book of the Bible. It would be fitting to study each of the four chapters carefully. In the original Hebrew language, there is much beauty, repetition, comparison and contrast, and play on words, as a marvelous piece of literature.

However, for our purposes, we want to consider the book briefly, especially as it relates to the call of Jonah. This message has four parts: what God does; what Jonah does; what the unbelievers do; and, God’s concern. Especially, we want to consider God’s concern, compared with our own cares and concerns. May God in his mercy save us from all our sins that are contrary to God’s will and character. May we rightly respond to God’s call. And, by the grace of God, may we all grow in God’s character and concerns.

First, what the LORD God does. The story of Jonah is short, but powerful. The book gives us insight to who God is by what he does. What does God do in this book? First, the LORD God commands Jonah to preach a word of warning and judgment. Look at

1:1-2, “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” The LORD proclaims his word through people, such as prophets and preachers. Next, the LORD hurls a great storm. From this we learn that you can run from God, but you can’t hide. God then appoints a great fish big enough to swallow Jonah. The fish obeyed God and swallowed Jonah, but didn’t digest him as fish food. The next action of God is to calm the sea. God controls the winds and the waves. Next, God speaks to the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land. Obviously, God miraculously saved Jonah while he was inside the fish. Later, after the response in Nineveh, God relents from judging Nineveh. This shows that God is merciful; God has mercy on those who repent. In the final chapter, God appoints a plant to come up over Jonah, showing concern for Jonah’s discomfort. God is a God who comforts the afflicted. God then surprisingly appoints a worm to attack the same plant and wither it. This shows that God sometimes afflicts the comfortable. God appoints a scorching east wind and the sun beats down on Jonah’s head. Here we see that God sometimes gives people a hard time as a test or training. The last thing that God does in this story is to speak to Jonah, with a rebuke and a question. Here we see that God is the Great Counselor, Advisor and Shepherd.

So who is the LORD God? The LORD is the LORD of heaven and earth. The LORD controls the winds, the sea, the fish, the plants, even the worms. The LORD is the Sovereign God who sees and oversees Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites. The LORD is God who seeks to save rather than destroy. We’ll think about this more later.

Second, what Jonah does. Jonah’s response to God’s call was not initially good. In fact, the first thing Jonah does is to run in the opposite direction. Jonah goes down to Joppa, and boards a ship headed for Spain, far away from Israel and from Nineveh. Jonah was fast asleep in the belly of the ship. Jonah explained to the sailors who he was and told them to throw him overboard. After being swallowed by a great fish, he prays from inside the fish. After being vomited onto dry land, the word of the LORD comes to him a second time: ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’” God gave Jonah a second chance. This time Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD; he arose and went to the great city of Nineveh. He went into the city and called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Jonah preached that God’s judgment would come upon them in 40 days.

In chapter four, Jonah complains to God in prayer after God shows the Ninevites mercy. Clearly, Jonah was not happy about this; he wanted them to be judged and destroyed by God. In his prayer, Jonah is angry and tells God he would rather die than live. Perhaps God will change his mind and destroy them after all. Jonah even waits and watches the city, hoping to see them destroyed, perhaps with fire from heaven, like God

did to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). Clearly, Jonah hates the Ninevites with a fury. Jonah gets mad again, this time about the plant withering and the scorching heat and he asks God for the second time that he might die.

Jonah has been called “the reluctant prophet.” Reluctant means unwilling or hesitant. Perhaps that title is a bit generous for Jonah. Our Bible study members had harsher adjectives to describe him after our Bible study: rebellious, angry, self-righteous, hypocritical, judgmental, hateful. We see many sinful traits in Jonah. We should ask ourselves: do I find in myself any of these attitudes towards God or towards others?

Third, what unbelievers do. One surprise in this book is the actions and attitudes of the non-Jewish people in the story. In chapter one, we see the sailors who try their best to save the ship in the storm, against Jonah’s advice to throw him into the sea. Then they throw him overboard with a sincere prayer crying out, “O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” Not only that, when the sea calms, the sailors offer a sacrifice to the LORD and make vows. In fact, the sailors exemplify proper fear and worship of the LORD. Jonah told the sailors that he fears or worships the LORD, but the sailors are actually the ones who show proper fear of the LORD by their words and actions..

The same thing happens in Nineveh. When the Ninevites hear Jonah’s message of judgment, they believe God. They call for a city-wide fast from the king to the least of them. The king issues a decree for everyone to fast, wear sackcloth and turn from evil in repentance, and to call out mightily to God. He adds, “Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” Clearly, this is what God wants. God wants everyone to come to repentance and to be saved. The wicked Ninevites had a better attitude before God and a better understanding with what God wanted, than even the Jewish prophet Jonah’s attitude and understanding.

Fourth, God’s concern. It is clear that God wants sinners to turn from evil and be saved, rather than to be judged and destroyed. God didn’t only want to save Israel. God wants to save all people. 1 Timothy 2:4 says, “[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Again, 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord...is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” The story of Jonah is one of the best stories in the Bible that shows this.

A key passage in this book is what Jonah says about God in his complaining prayer to God (4:2b): “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.” Jonah knew right things about God. He knew that God is the LORD of heaven and earth. He knew that God is gracious

and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Jonah was surely thankful that God saved him through the great fish. But Jonah did not want to extend this grace and salvation of God to the Ninevites.

The story doesn't tell us why Jonah felt this way. Perhaps Jonah had justified reasons to hate the Ninevites. Maybe they mistreated or murdered many Israelites, or even one of his relatives. Is there anyone or a group of people that you think cannot be saved, or worse, that you hope they will not be saved but rather judged by God? Perhaps violent or abusive criminals? Or people or nations who historically hurt or attacked or ruined your nation or your relatives? Older Koreans may feel animosity toward Japan for their historical war crimes against them. Racism or nationalism easily causes hatred, revenge and wars.

It has been said that one should not preach about God's judgment or hell without tears. Yet I don't think Jonah had tears for the Ninevites when he preached God's judgment to them. Isn't it amazing that God could choose and use Jonah as a prophet of the LORD? Isn't the LORD the true hero, shepherd and evangelist in this book?

The LORD God cares. The LORD cared for the sailors. The LORD cared for the Ninevites. The LORD even cared for Jonah. In fact, the LORD worked hard to lead Jonah to repentance of his wrong thinking and bad attitude. We don't even know if Jonah repented. The book ends with a rebuke and a question from God to Jonah. The LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Jonah had pity or concern for a plant that he did not tend or take care of. But Jonah didn't even care about his own life, much less the lives and souls of the Ninevites. In contrast to Jonah, God cared for them all. Do you see God's heart for lost souls? Do you see how God wants us to share his perspective and his mind and heart? So, who do you care about or have concern for?

I can't end this message without mentioning Jesus. Jesus took the story of Jonah seriously. So we should too. What did Jesus have to say about the story of Jonah? When people demanded a sign from Jesus, he answered them: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Mt 12:39-40). The fish could not hold Jonah, and the earth could not hold Jesus. Jesus

rose from the dead. He was talking about his resurrection. That is the sign that he was indeed from God.

Jesus also rebuked his own listeners as worse than the people of Nineveh, saying, “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Mt 12:41). Jesus wanted his people to take his message seriously and to turn to God in repentance. How about us? Do we take the word of God in the Holy Bible seriously and repent? Is our response better—or even as good as—the people of Nineveh?

God calls us again and again through his word. God has a holy mission for you. Are you running away from the LORD? Are you avoiding his call?

God asks us, “Should I not pity (or care) for lost people?” Praise and thank God that in his mercy he does not treat us as our sins deserve. God does not give up on us, though our spiritual condition and attitude are often not better than Jonah’s. God also asks us, “Do you care about others who are lost without Jesus and need God’s mercy?” A new school year is upon us. Some of you will be going back to school. Will you care about your fellow students? Will you even pray for them, or share God’s love with them? Some of you have people you work with or are close to who need Jesus and God’s mercy in their lives. Will you care or have concern for them? Will you care for family members, friends, or even strangers? Let’s pray that we may not despise or be indifferent to people who need God’s mercy in Jesus. Let’s pray that we may obey God’s call and grow in the care, concern and compassion of God for those who need his mercy.