

Jonah - Have You Ever Been Angry Enough to Die Over a Bush? Notes from After the Sermon

Have you ever been angry enough to die over a bush? Sounds ridiculous doesn't it. Who would do that? Jonah for starters – and I am willing to bet, at some point in our lives, all of us. When I say the name of Jonah what is the first word that comes to mind? Probably fish or a whale. Perhaps prophet. Small book in the OT, found somewhere between ... well who knows exactly (hint: Obadiah and Micah).

What do we know about Jonah? He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 where he is identified as a prophet. And God had a plan for Jonah, go to Ninevah. This was something almost unheard of in biblical times, sending a prophet to an outside nation. But even more shocking was Jonah's refusal to accept the mission.

What do we know about Ninevah? Ninevah was the capital of ancient Assyria. Ancient texts tell us that the city was 60 miles in circumference, meaning at that time it would have taken about 3 days to go around it. In our Scripture reading we are told that at the time of Jonah it had about 120,000 inhabitants.

Why wouldn't Jonah want to go there?

It may have been because Jonah didn't *want* the Assyrians in Nineveh to escape God's judgment. The Assyrians were enemies of Israel and had been for generations. The Assyrians had conquered parts of Israel in the past and had killed people in cruel and inhumane ways. Nahum 3 gives us an idea of how wicked the people of Nineveh were. Here is how Ninevah is described: "City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty – no end to the plunder! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end – they stumble over the bodies! Enslaving nations and peoples – full of endless cruelty." They were brutal, and godless, and sinful – and Jonah knew what should happen to them. He knew what would be fair.

But it was likely also that Jonah knew he had been given a difficult job to do. Jonah had every reason to expect that at the very best, he would be mocked and treated as a fool. More likely he would be tortured and killed. These people

crossed over into Israel and killed just for the sport of it – how would they likely receive Jonah? I am sure he was thinking he was dead. And for what? To try and save a people who, in Jonah’s mind, didn’t deserve saving in the first place.

So, Jonah took off for Tarshish, some 2500 miles in the opposite direction. But you know what happened after that, right? Storm at sea, disaster strikes, Jonah tossed overboard and swallowed by a whale. And in Jonah, Ch. 3, where is Jonah? In Ninevah, proclaiming God’s word, and v. 10 says, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them and he did not do it.”

Jonah succeeds! Mission accomplished! His words cause change and lives are spared. So, he is happy, right? Wrong. Listen to Ch. 4, v. 1: “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.” Jonah is about to throw a fit. And he thinks he’s entitled. Listen again to how he describes God: “I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

So, why didn’t Jonah really want to go to Ninevah? He knew God too well. He was afraid God would protect him, afraid the people would listen to his message, and afraid God would then spare them. So, what is Jonah’s response? He throws a fit, right there in the desert in front of God. And instead of getting angry, God calmly asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah doesn’t even answer – he’s giving God the silent treatment. He sits down on a rock above the city and waits to see what God will do. I don't know how much time goes by, but after some time passes God makes a bush and causes it to grow and cover Jonah's head to give him shade. Our Scripture says Jonah was “very happy” about the bush. But does Jonah thank God, start talking to him, maybe even apologize? No, he just continues to sit. So, on the second day God creates a worm, which attacks the bush and causes it to die.

Note all the details here. Can’t you just see Jonah sitting there, his arms crossed, giving God the evil eye? And God looking down at Jonah, just shaking his head. And then when the sun comes up God causes an east wind that blew the heat of the desert in upon Jonah; and Jonah still sits there sweating and suffering

and all self-righteous in his anger, until he asks that he might die. Just two chapters ago, Jonah was praying for deliverance from the belly of the fish and now he asks to die. And God says to him again, "Well, Jonah, are you ready to give me your answer? I asked you a question. 'Do you have a right to be angry?'" That's a loaded question isn't it – when things don't go our way, do we have a right to be angry with God? I am amazed how stubborn Jonah was. His response, "I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." Seriously?

You know, it is easy to point the finger at Jonah, but haven't you ever said that to God, too? Haven't you ever said to Him, "I want what I want. And I want it now. I don't care what your plans are. Of course, I'm angry. I don't like the way you're running things." Just like Jonah, you've sat down on God. Now notice what God said: And 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. [In other words, listen to yourself - you feel sorry about a plant, and sorry for yourself.] And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, ..."

How does Jonah's story end? We don't know! The book ends on that question from God. Why? Because that's the message for us – what would be our answer? God loved the Ninevites, despite what they had done and even though Jonah hated them. And I sometimes think that there is an awful lot of Jonah in us. We all have our Ninevahs – places and people we don't want God to save because we know they deserve to be destroyed. But the truth is that God loves them, just as He loves us.

Think about the spiritual failure of Jonah ... who experienced mercy but gave none; who received love but returned none; who benefited from the patience of God but resented God for showing that same patience to Nineveh.

Where do we fit in this picture? Around us are unsaved people -- the "godless," we call them, the lawless and the disobedient. We sing of God's grace and mercy and compassion, but we avoid saying anything to them. God has sent us with a message for this world. What is our message? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son; that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Isn't that the heart of our proclamation, that we know a God who brings life and meaning? Will you be a witness to this message to all those

who are lost, without deciding for yourself whether they are deserving? Or will you sit in the desert, hoping to die because God has taken away your bush?