



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for March 14, 2010
Released on Wednesday, March 10, 2010**

"A Community to Redeem"

Lesson Text: Jonah 3:10 - 4:5

Background Scripture: Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

Devotional Reading: Matthew 9:9-13

Jonah 3:10

10 And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

Jonah 4:1-5

1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

2 And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

3 Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

4 Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry?

5 So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to show how Jonah came to the realization that our God is a God of mercy who sought to redeem even the pagan Ninevites.

Principle: to see that God has done all we need to redeem us and will continue to pursue us with His love.

Application: to demonstrate that when we respond to God's redemptive work through His messengers, God gives us a new start in Him and restores us.

INTRODUCTION

We all enjoy happy endings. In studying history, we get satisfaction when we learn that George Washington and his troops defeated the British at Yorktown and that the Allies defeated Hitler in World War II.

We like these endings because we would like all life to be this way. Sadly, often it is not. At first sight the book of Jonah seems to have a happy ending. Jonah runs away. God disciplines him and brings him back. Jonah obeys and preaches to Nineveh, the people repent, and God forgives them.

The book ends on a discordant note that is introduced by Jonah himself. He does not share God's joy in redeeming a whole community in desperate need of Him.

This lesson reminds us that it is possible for a person to dutifully do God's will and yet not share His mind and heart. Jonah's discontent forces us to examine our own motive in serving God.

LESSON BACKGROUND

This lesson continues immediately from the final verse of last week's lesson (March 7 – *Mission to the Community*). The lesson background is therefore the same. In addition, the following are some distinctive and interesting features about Jonah's life:

- 1.** Jonah is the only prophet of the Old Testament known to attempt a seagoing excursion.
- 2.** Jonah is the only prophet in the books of the Minor Prophets known to have delivered a prophecy outside of Israel. There are several instances of prophets in the books of the Major Prophets being away from Israel or Judah: Elijah went to Zarephath in Phoenicia (1 Kings 17:7–10); Elisha traveled to Damascus of Syria to anoint Hazael as Syria's next king (2 Kings 8:7); Jeremiah was taken by force to Egypt, where he delivered some of his last prophecies (Jeremiah 43:7–13); and both Daniel and Ezekiel carried out their prophetic careers in Babylon.
- 3.** None of the other prophets in the books of the Minor Prophets rebelled against God and attempted to flee.
- 4.** The book of Jonah is primarily a narrative. It is not a collection of prophecies.
- 5.** The other books of the Minor Prophets do not record any miracles that directly involved the prophets.
- 6.** Jonah is the only minor prophet who was mentioned by Jesus, as a sign for a wicked and adulterous generation (Matthew 12:39, 40). Zechariah was also cited by Jesus (Luke 11:51), but not everyone agrees that that man was one of the minor prophets, for there are about 30 people in the Old Testament with that name.

GOD'S GRACIOUS COMPASSION (Jonah 3:10)

1. To what extent were the Ninevites repentant and converted (Jonah 3:10)?

The Ninevites had responded favorably to Jonah's preaching (Jonah 3:5-9). They evidenced their sincerity not only through outward signs of sorrow but also through a change in behavior. Though the change proved not to be permanent, it was significant enough to later serve as an illustration for the Lord Jesus. He compared the Ninevites favorably with His own unbelieving generation, who refused to believe the message of One greater than Jonah (Matt. 12:41).

God took note of their works, particularly how they abandoned their "evil way" (Jonah 3:10). This was not a full-scale conversion to Israel's God, for He is here simply called "God" (Elohim), not "the Lord" (Yahweh), which was His covenant name with Israel. Their turning from evil merely showed their sensitivity to His word and their willingness to take it seriously. This was enough to elicit a favorable response from Him.

2. Was God fickle when He did not destroy Nineveh? Explain.

The statement that God repented of the evil may give us the impression that He was fickle, contradicting the previous declaration of doom. But this is not the case. It means only that He changed His method of dealing with the Ninevites because *they* had changed. His purpose and principles remain immutable and eternal (see His dealings with Saul in 1 Samuel 15:11, 29).

When, through Jonah, God told these people that their city would be overthrown in forty days (Jonah 3:4), this was the only possibility for them in their sinful state. To assert His holiness, He had no other options. But when the Ninevites forsook their wicked ways, it opened the door for Him to exercise His

mercy and grace toward them. Thus, what is reported as a change in God was only a change in His operations because *they* had changed. His character remained uncompromised.

This is still how God deals with mankind. To those who are alienated from Him by sin, He offers no prospect but judgment. But when they respond to His warnings and the Holy Spirit's influence, He is free to extend compassion to them without compromising His holy character (cf. Eph. 2:1-5).

JONAH'S UNGRACIOUS RESPONSE (Jonah 4:1-3)

3. Why was Jonah angry with the Lord (Jonah 4:1)?

Jonah's response to the repentance of the people of Nineveh is not how a preacher should react! He is angry, "very angry." It was in contrast with God, who was pleased with the Ninevites' repentance. James 1:20 says that human anger does not produce the righteous life that God desires. Jonah's reaction certainly illustrates that principle.

Jonah was vexed and irritated that God did not destroy them as He had promised.

4. What do Jonah's strong emotional responses in Jonah 4:1, 3, 6, 8, 9 say about his level of spiritual maturity? How do we learn from Jonah in this regard?

One fruit of the Spirit is *temperance*, meaning self-control (Galatians 5:23). Expressions of emotion are not wrong in and of themselves, of course. But wide swings in emotion within a short period of time may indicate a certain lack of self-control.

Self-control is a strong indicator of maturity, even in a preschooler. Indeed, much of parental and Christian education and nurture are designed to encourage individuals to cultivate self-control. To be able to control the extreme highs and lows of euphoria and discouragement is to free oneself to deal sensibly and effectively with whatever the day brings. Jonah's emotional extremes exemplify someone caught up in self. Whenever we find ourselves caught up in such extremes, we need to ask, "Is this the mature response?" (We also realize, of course, that wild swings of emotion can indicate mental illness, which calls for a different approach.)

5. What aspect of God's character had caused Jonah to flee (v. 2)?

Jonah claimed that his insight into God's character was what had caused him to flee to Tarshish when he was first called. So sure was he that God would forgive the Ninevites that he fled in the opposite direction. He wanted no part in it! Jonah's admission of that at this point also reveals that when he did preach to the Ninevites, he did so under duress. He finally obeyed - but only because he had no other choice. As a prophet, he had to do his duty.

Jonah's indictment of God included several charges. First, He was gracious - extending His favor to the undeserving, even those outside His covenants. He was also merciful, or compassionate. He had the kind of tender affection a mother would have for her child. In addition, He was slow to anger, not hasty in punishing sinners (cf. Exod. 34:6; Joel 2:13).

Moreover, the Lord was "of great kindness" (Jonah 4:2). The Hebrew word used for "kindness" denotes unfailing love and covenant loyalty. No single English word can adequately express its depth of meaning. That Jonah should criticize God for this attribute is incredible, for it was the primary characteristic of His dealings with Israel. Yet because of this and the other attributes mentioned, God repented of the evil - that is, He did not bring His prophesied judgment.

6. How was Jonah inconsistent in criticizing God's character? How is this inconsistency reflected in modern thinking?

Jonah was inconsistent in his criticism of God's character. Ironically, Jonah never considered these characteristics of God flaws when they were exhibited to apostate Israel. Neither did he object to them when God extended them to him, the runaway prophet. Amazingly, Jonah had constructed an image of what God should be like when dealing with Israel and another of what He should be like when dealing with wicked Assyrians. When he was confronted with what God was like in all contexts, he was angry.

The basic problem was not the nature of God but the deep-seated nationalistic prejudice of Jonah. He wanted a God who would belong to Israel only and thus limit His mercy to one people. He hated the Assyrians for their current reputation and for what he knew they would someday do to Israel. Extermination was the only fate for them he could accept. When God refused to carry this out, Jonah was not only disappointed; he was seething with rage.

Regrettably, some of God's people still have difficulty rising above their prejudices. Due to international rivalries and wars, they harbor deep-seated hatred of their nation's enemies. Twentieth century American Christians found it extremely difficult to love Germans during World Wars I and II, Japanese during World War II, and Russians during the Cold War era. The attitudes of some were akin to that of Jonah.

Wars and rumors of wars will be with us throughout this age (Matt. 24:6), but that should not hinder us from obeying Jesus' command to love and pray for our enemies (5:44). By doing this we give proof that we are true children of God, who gives good gifts to the just and the unjust alike (v. 45). Along with this, we must remember that our own sinful nation is as deserving of judgment and as needy of grace as any other. We need to pray for our own people's repentance.

7. What request did Jonah make after the Lord spared Nineveh? How did Jonah's motive differ from others who had made similar requests (v. 3)?

Jonah was so distraught that he prayed that the Lord would terminate his life. He was not alone among Old Testament saints in his desire to die. Moses, for example, overburdened with administering justice for all Israel in the wilderness, desired death as an escape (Num. 11:10-15). God relieved him of his misery by setting up an organization of seventy elders to assist him (vs. 16,17).

Elijah also wished to die when he was fleeing from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:4). Physically exhausted and emotionally spent, he could not cope with this anticlimax after seeing Yahweh's brilliant victory over Baal. He had been zealous for the Lord's name (v. 10), but Israel was still apostate, and he apparently stood alone. From his limited view, he saw no further purpose in life.

Unlike Moses and Elijah, Jonah had no legitimate reason for his despair. God's response (Jonah 4:4) reveals that Jonah's anger was born of the selfish desire (to see Israel's vicious enemy crushed once and for all).

GOD'S PENETRATING INQUIRY (Jonah 4:4,5)

8. Why did God ask Jonah whether he was justified to be angry? (v. 4)

The Lord responds with the purpose of beginning an attitude adjustment for Jonah. The question we see here demands a genuine introspection, a self-examination of the heart. Jonah knows that he has no real justification for his attitude, but his anger becomes his defense mechanism. People who know that they are in the wrong frequently resort to anger or a temper tantrum. Pride keeps them from the blessing of acknowledging guilt so as to be forgiven.

We too would be well advised to consider God's question about being *angry*. Is anger ever justifiable? Anger can be a very toxic emotion, and the Bible has a lot to say about it (Proverbs 29:22; Colossians 3:8; etc.). Since Jesus became angry (Mark 3:3-7), we cannot say that anger is a sin in and of itself (Eph. 4:26). The reason for and result of the anger are important to consider.

In our relationships, emotions will sometimes take over and cloud our thinking. We should never make a decision in the heat of anger or the depth of depression. "Sleeping on it" is always good, along with seeking God's will in prayer. But with both of these we need to saturate ourselves with God's Word so that we can know the true mind of God.

9. How was Jonah like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son?

Jonah was a strong advocate of God's justice and punishment, but he had little understanding of His grace and forgiveness. It seems inconceivable that a prophet of God could be so hardhearted as to demand the destruction of at least 120,000 people (cf. Jonah 4:11). He was like the elder brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25-30). He could not find it in himself to rejoice at the return of wayward sinners. God's forgiveness caused him to lose his desire to live.

Before we condemn Jonah, let us examine our own attitudes toward others. Having been forgiven, do we begrudge forgiveness to others? Do we think God ought to forgive those who have grievously injured us? Does self-righteousness rob us of the joy of living? Do we regard some persons or groups as beyond the pale of God's grace? Does it bother us to think of sinful people dying and going to hell? Are we really in tune with the character of the God we say we worship?

The Lord could have disciplined Jonah severely for his improper attitude and disrespectful words (Jonah 1:1-3; 4:2,3), but He was as gracious to him as He was to Nineveh. He recognized that for all Jonah's problems, he still was teachable and could be brought to see matters from God's perspective.

10. How did Jonah respond to the question from the Lord? (v. 5)

Jonah gave no verbal answer to the Lord's question. His "answer" was to remove himself to the east side of Nineveh and watch to see the city's fate. Whether this occurred before or after the forty days of grace had elapsed does not matter. What matters is that it occurred after the Lord had revealed His decision to withhold judgment and had rebuked Jonah through His gentle question.

In spite of God's invitation to reconsider, Jonah remained adamant. He must have assumed that God might yet change His mind and carry out His threat. He was prepared to stay there for some time, for he built a booth, or crude shelter, that was probably made from tree branches. He sat under it and was thus able to endure the heat of the area.

Our lesson text ends at this point, with Jonah still defiant and unreconciled to God's mind. Indeed, the book never reveals whether he ever came to see things God's way. But the rest of the chapter reveals that God did not give up on him. He used a plant, a worm, and an east wind to teach Jonah a lesson concerning proper priorities. If a plant that eased his discomfort mattered a great deal to Jonah, how much more should thousands of God's creatures matter to God?

11. What lasting spiritual lessons does the book of Jonah offer?

The book of Jonah offers lasting spiritual lessons. It portrays the selfish inconsistency of fallen human nature, anxious to grasp God's favor for oneself and one's group while denying it to others. It also portrays the grace of God, extended

equally to the repentant city and a rebellious prophet. Let us follow His example (Matt. 5:44,45), remembering that His Son was willing to forgive even those who callously put Him to death (Luke 23:34; cf. Eph. 4:32).

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** God always responds in mercy to true repentance (Jonah 3:10).
- 2.** Nothing reveals our true selves quite like what displeases and angers us (Jonah 4:1).
- 3.** It is easier to know the facts about our Father than to act like our Father (Jonah 4:2).
- 4.** Focusing on our own thoughts rather than God's thoughts always leads us to wrong conclusions (Jonah 4:3).
- 5.** Anger is not always wrong, but far too often it is (Jonah 4:4; cf. Eph. 4:26).
- 6.** The work of God never ultimately depends upon any one man or ministry (Jonah 4:5).

CONCLUSION

God has chosen all those who belong to Him to become part of His mission to redeem the world. This world is His community, and He wants to draw everyone to Himself. Jonah was part of that mission, and so are we. Jonah learned of the extreme mercy of God. We must show mercy to others and share the good news of Jesus with all we encounter.

Jonah was a very reluctant missionary to the Ninevites, but as our lesson emphasizes, they were a community to redeem. In the same way, we as believers today may have to reach those in places that we do not want to go. In these instances, only the love of Christ can make us understand the value of redemption to community. Our God has a world – our community – to redeem, and He accomplishes His plan through us.

PRAYER

Lord, as we tell our community about the righteousness that You can provide, may our attitudes attract others to the message. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Learn from Jonah's mistakes.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our next lesson, "**Family as Community**," we will see how a young foreigner named Ruth found community in her newfound family who worshiped the God of Israel. Ruth experienced God's mercy in her new community. Study Ruth 1:1-16.

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