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GOD'S RELUCTANT MISSIONARY

Jonah 1-4

By

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Special Missions Message

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If you could pick an ideal spot to live and raise your family, where would it be? The ideal for many Christians would be to live in a beautiful, remote area where they could live off the land and raise their kids apart from all the crime, pollution and problems that go along with crowded cities. Many Christians dream about retiring in some beautiful spot where they can get away from people. We don't want to be bothered with the problems of this messed up world! But I'd like to suggest that an isolationist mindset, as appealing as it may be, goes against the heart of God and removes God's people from the very people God wants them to reach with His good news.

If you had been a Jew living in the ninth century B.C., you wouldn't have wanted to live in or even visit the city of Nineveh. It was inhabited by a godless, wicked, violent people, the Assyrians. Archaeological inscriptions have been found in which Assyrian kings boast of their own cruelty, such as flaying their enemies and hanging their skin on the city walls. In our text, when the king calls his people to repentance, he specifies their violence (3:8). Much of that violence was aimed at the surrounding nations, such as Israel, which Assyria tried to conquer and, about 125 years later, did conquer. It was to this violent, wicked enemy of Israel that God called the prophet Jonah. It would be like calling a Jew during World War II to go witness to Nazi Germany. I think we can understand why Jonah boarded the next ship headed in the opposite direction!

When you study this book, you have to ask: Why did God pick an *unwilling* man to go to Nineveh? Weren't there any willing prophets in Israel who may have swallowed hard, but at least would have said, "All right, Lord, I'll go"? Why pick Jonah?

I think God picked Jonah because he reflects the attitude of so many of God's people down through the centuries. Israel was God's covenant people, supposed to be His channel of salvation for all people (Gen. 12:1-3). But they had bottled the blessings for

themselves. They had lost God's heart for the nations. But before we condemn those comfortable covenant people, we need to see that, like Jonah, we often value our own comfort above the souls of millions of lost people who need to hear of God's judgment and mercy.

Jonah was an orthodox believer. He had his theology straight. He knew that God created the earth (1:9). He feared God (1:9). He knew that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness (4:2). That's a paraphrase of Exodus 34:6, which shows that Jonah knew his Bible. If he had been a New Testament believer, he would have known the Great Commission and John 3:16.

But the problem wasn't Jonah's knowledge or beliefs. The problem was Jonah's heart: He lacked God's heart for lost people. The message of the book of Jonah is summed up in the question God asks Jonah in the last verse of the book: *"Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city ...?"* What do you think: Should God have compassion on a bunch of wicked, violent people? Be careful how you answer, because your answer will have drastic effects on how you live! Since God leaves it as a question, I want us to think about it as a question:

Since God has compassion on lost people, should not we?

1. God has compassion for lost people.

God's heart for Nineveh comes through in 4:11, where He refers to it as "the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals." In fact, every time God mentions Nineveh to Jonah, He calls it a great city (1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11). I'm sure that Jonah would have used some other adjectives to describe it: That rotten city ... wicked city ... evil city ... expletive deleted city God called it a great city, because there were many lost people there on whom He had compassion.

Commentators are divided over the meaning of "120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand." Some say it refers to the total population, meaning that they were morally ignorant. In support of this view, it can be argued from archaeology that Nineveh couldn't have been much larger

than this, since the inner city wall was only about eight miles around (although it was 100 feet high, 30 feet thick!).

But 3:3 mentions that Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. This must refer not just to the city within the walls, but to the population in outlying areas ("suburbs"). Thus I prefer the second view, that the 120,000 refers to young children who were not yet old enough to know their right from left hands. This view is especially appropriate in the context, where God is appealing to his hardhearted prophet, who had compassion on a silly plant, that he must share God's compassion toward the people of Nineveh. God is saying, "Jonah, even if you can't stand the adults, look at the children! Look at the animals!" Little children and animals will melt the hearts of the most crusty of men. God is saying, "Jonah, if I wipe out Nineveh as you want Me to do, 120,000 small children and many animals will die. Is that *really* what you want Me to do?"

Isn't it significant that God knew all about that foreign city? He had the infants and toddlers counted. He even knew about the animals! God never puts the value of animals above the value of people, as those in the animal rights movement of our day do. They kill unborn babies and spend millions to save the whales. But God does want His people to treat animals with kindness (Prov. 12:10). God also knew about the wickedness of Nineveh (1:2). But even so, He had compassion on it.

Not all lost people are wicked and violent, like those of Nineveh. The text also shows that God had compassion on the pagan sailors, who were much nicer than Jonah was! They had to throw their cargo overboard to try to stay afloat in this storm. When they finally figure out that Jonah is the cause of it, I could see them flying into a rage and saying, "Throw the bum overboard! Look at all the trouble he's caused us!" And yet they did everything they could to avoid throwing him overboard.

What irony! Here's the man of God who is more concerned about a silly plant that provided shade for him for one day than he is for a whole city full of people who are about to perish. And yet here are these pagan sailors who are concerned for the life of one man, even though that man has caused them to lose their cargo and almost lose their lives! But even though they were nice guys, they

needed to repent and believe in the one true God, which they did when He calmed the sea (1:16).

The point is, God has compassion on lost people, whether they're outwardly wicked or "nice" lost people. They all need to turn from their sin and trust in God's provision for their sin, the Lord Jesus Christ. God wants His people to reflect His compassion so that all people will see that He is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (4:2). But,

2. God's people don't always share His compassion for lost people.

You would think that those who have received God's mercy would be quick to extend it to others. But it doesn't work that way. Like Jonah, we're all quick to want God to judge people we dislike, forgetting that apart from His grace, we would be just like them. "Judge them, God, but don't judge me! I'm one of your chosen people!"

Let's be honest: Just like Jonah, we all have people we dislike. Maybe it's noisy, rude neighbors who blast their stereos and throw empty beer cans on your property. I get irked with irresponsible people who blame others for their problems. Sad to say, but there's a lot of racial prejudice among Christians. I've heard Christians make derogatory comments about African Americans, Jews, Mexicans, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups. I can hear Jonah complaining, "Lord, if these people weren't so wicked, they wouldn't be in this predicament. So why should I go help them?" I've often felt like that.

It's just a short step from dislike to disobedience. Like Jonah, it's easy to turn away in dislike from the very people God wants us to reach. And it's always easy to excuse our disobedience with theological reasons. I can imagine Jonah thinking, "The Lord didn't stop me from getting a ticket to Tarshish. This must be His will." Or, "The people of Nineveh couldn't be open to God. They'll laugh me out of town. Besides, there are so many unreached in Israel. Why go to Nineveh?"

But, after his unplanned submarine ride, Jonah finally went to Nineveh. But he went reluctantly. His preaching must have been as

exciting as hearing somebody read through the phone book. But, amazingly, everybody from the king on down believed God and repented! It was an evangelist's dream! Over 500,000 conversions in one short campaign! You would think Jonah would be ecstatic.

But he was greatly displeased and angry (4:1). If he had gone and preached judgment and God had rained fire and brimstone on Nineveh, Jonah would have returned to Israel as a national hero: ticker tape parade through Jerusalem! Maybe he would have made it out of the minor prophets into the major prophets! But of all things, they repented. Jonah justified his anger by quoting the Bible back to God! "God, I knew this would happen. That's why I didn't want to go there in the first place."

Have you ever thought about the fact that Jonah, sleeping in the ship while the sailors are about to perish, is a graphic picture of God's complacent people? The captain's rebuke to Jonah is as pointed as you can get: "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish" (1:6). Ouch! Isn't that just what we do--we snooze comfortably while the world around us perishes and wonders if our God cares?

Even after Nineveh repents, Jonah is more concerned about his own comfort than he is about the needy people in this great city. God never told Jonah to leave the city. He may have wanted Jonah to stay and teach these people His word. But Jonah still holds to his hope that God will blast the city. So he goes a safe distance outside of town and pulls up his lawn chair to watch the fireworks (4:5). It's a bit warm, even under his umbrella, so God sends a plant that grows up overnight to shade the pouting prophet.

It's the first time in the book that Jonah is happy. He was unhappy about God's command to go to Nineveh; he was unhappy about the storm; he was quite unhappy inside the fish; he was unhappy about the repentance of Nineveh; but he was very happy about this plant that gave him temporary comfort. But just as Jonah is pouring himself a glass of lemonade, God sends a worm to destroy the plant and a hot wind to make Jonah miserable. So Jonah gets angry about the plant, so angry that he again asks God to take his life. Note how God deals with his reluctant missionary: He

asks him three questions which lead to an unstated, but implicit fourth question:

- 1) Do you have good reason to be angry (4:4)?
- 2) Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant (4:9)?
- 3) Should I not have compassion on Nineveh ... (4:11)?

The implied fourth question to Jonah and to us is:

3. Should we not have God's compassion for the lost?

The Book of Jonah could have ended quite nicely after chapter three: Everybody repented and lived happily ever after. But there was still a problem with God's reluctant missionary. In chapter one, God had Jonah's *mind*. He knew the truth about God. His theology was straight. In chapter two, God got Jonah's *will*. He repented and agreed to pay what he had vowed. In chapter three, God got Jonah's *body*, as he went to Nineveh to preach in obedience to God's renewed command. But as chapter four shows, God still didn't have Jonah's *heart*. God's final question is, "Jonah, should I not have compassion on Nineveh?" The implicit question behind it is, "Should you, too, not have My compassion for Nineveh?"

The book ends with this unanswered question. Did Jonah get the point and repent? I think that the existence of the book shows that he did. The abrupt question at the end catches the reader off guard. As we read along, we tend to think, "How can Jonah be so callused and selfish? How can he be so concerned about his own comfort while a whole city is on the brink of judgment?" But just when we're clucking our tongues at Jonah, God ends the book with a swift knockout blow that drops us to the canvas: "Your problem is that, like Jonah, *you're* self-centered. You lack My compassion for lost people!" POW!

Notice how God gets Jonah to see his petty selfishness. First God asks him, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" (4:4). At this point, Jonah may have thought, "Yes!" After all, he's angry at God for showing mercy to Israel's enemy. That sounds noble enough. But God's next question, after the incident with the plant, is, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" (4:9). Being angry about a silly little plant and a worm isn't quite as noble

as being angry about a “just” cause! God is saying, “Jonah, the fact that you’re angry over such petty little annoyances shows that you’re totally caught up with yourself. You care more about your momentary comfort than you care about the eternal destiny of thousands of lost people.”

That’s God’s question to us: *“Since I have compassion on lost people, should not you?”* I would guess that most of us have trusted Christ as Savior. We hold to orthodox theology. I hope most of us have yielded ourselves to Jesus as Lord. Many of us are involved in serving Him in some way. But, like Jonah, we’re so caught up with pursuing our own comfort that we’re insensitive to those around us who are perishing without Christ. The question I need to ask myself frequently is, *“Do I have God’s heart of compassion for the lost?”*

Conclusion

I want to apply this message in two specific ways. The first has to do with the fact that God has brought over 400 students from every continent on the globe to our doorstep. Many are from countries where missionaries are not allowed. Many are lonely and want American friends. If they come and live in our city for four or more years and we never reach out to them in friendship, if we’re not burdened about their relationship with God, are we not, like Jonah, sleeping obliviously in the hold of the ship or sitting comfortably under our shade tree, while the world around us is about to perish?

According to International Students, Inc., less than 15 percent of international students in the United States today are touched by any Christian ministry. That means that fully 85 percent are never touched by the gospel in any way. In addition, 70 percent will never see inside an American home, and 80 percent will never have a Christian friend. Those are tragic figures! If you let us know, we will try to link you with an international student so that you can become their friend. I have resources available which will help you know how to befriend an international student. I know we’re all busy people. But shouldn’t we make time to show God’s kindness to these dear people He has brought to us?

The second application has to do with our church adopting an unreached people group. This is a strategy that makes the task of

world evangelization more bite-sized. As you may know, there are approximately 11,000 unreached people groups in the world today. A "people group" is defined as the largest number of people among whom the gospel can spread without encountering barriers of culture or language. They are "unreached" if they do not have a viable, indigenous, self-evangelizing church in their midst, open to everyone in that people group.

There are approximately 600 evangelical churches in the world per unreached people group. The adopt-a-people strategy tries to link churches with unreached peoples so that the church focuses on the particular group until it is reached. It involves making a commitment to pray, to give and, where possible, to send personnel to see a particular people group reached. It also involves linking our church with a mission agency that has targeted that people group or even has begun to engage them in ministry.

Flagstaff Christian Fellowship has supported Erik and Teri Powell, who came to Christ years ago as students at NAU, and who were sent out from this church. They now work with NGM Indian Tribal Outreach, with their focus on several unreached Indian tribes in Mexico. Erik has encouraged us to focus on and formally adopt the Durango Aztec Nahuatl people, a tribe of about 800 who live in two remote regions in central Mexico. Two NGM families, the Silks and the Elkins, who live in Durango, about 125 miles away, are seeking to reach this tribe. There is one believing family in the tribe, but no church or pastor. Wycliffe Bible Translators is just beginning the work of translating the Bible into their language. Gary Milton from our church has gone down twice to do dental work for them.

We want this to be a burden that God puts on your heart, not just another program the church comes up with. We believe this is a tangible, practical way that we, as a church, can be a part of the final task of seeing the church planted amongst every people group, the Lord willing by the year 2000. Over the next several weeks we'll be doing more to inform you about what it means to adopt a people group and how you can be involved. If you're not informed about the area of world missions, commit to educating yourself. For now, will you begin to pray regularly for the Durango Aztec Nahuatl people? Pray for your own heart toward the lost, that God

will break through any apathy or selfish focus that you may have fallen into and give you His compassion for the lost. Since our God has compassion on lost people, should not we?

Discussion Questions

1. The needs are so many and my time and resources so few. How can I know where to be involved?
2. We all have many luxuries. How can we know how much we should give toward missions?
3. Do missionaries need a special "calling" or are we all called to take the gospel to every people?
4. How can we fight apathy and develop God's heart of compassion toward the lost?

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