

Should I Not Be Concerned?

Jonah 1-4

Key Verse: 4:10-11

by Kevin Albright

Key Verses: 4:10-11, But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left--and also many animals?"

Jonah was a prophet in northern Israel around the year 770 B.C. (2Ki 14:25). Generally, the prophet books contain primarily the oracles or messages that the prophet received from God. Often, we know very little about the prophet. Yet the book of Jonah has only one message for Jonah to preach. The book of Jonah is rather a narrative--the story of Jonah and his interaction with God. There are a few more characters in this story: some Gentile sailors, the people of Nineveh, and their king and livestock. Nineveh was a great city in Assyria, which was an enemy nation to Israel. Within one generation from Jonah, Assyria would invade and conquer Israel, at God's direction, because of Israel's idolatry (2Ki 17:7,20).

The book of Jonah is so rich with so many things to learn about God and man; it would take four lessons to study the four chapters in any detail. So this message will cover the book briefly, focusing on the key point of the book regarding what God wants his people to learn. May this study enrich each of our lives with his mercy.

I. Jonah's Disobedience and God's Salvation (Ch.1-2)

First, God Commands and Jonah Flees (Ch.1). The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." (1:1-2) At that time, Assyria had a brutal government, famous for torturing their enemies. They were a feared and hated people. So God's word to Jonah was not an easy command to obey. He might have feared them. Perhaps he had friends or relatives who were brutally killed by the Assyrians. Whatever the reason, Jonah did not like God's command. So, he fled from the Lord and got on a ship headed for Tarshish, in the opposite direction.

Is it ever justifiable to disobey God's command? Then why are we so prone to reject God's will? It could be that our own dreams, desires and ideas of happiness don't always line up with God's purpose and will. Suppose God commands you to go and preach in a Muslim nation or any nation where your life could be threatened or where it is against the law to proclaim Christ or to evangelize. Suppose God wants you to go to urban gangs as one pastor ministered among New York City gangs (book/movie: The Cross and the Switchblade). God led a Korean woman to preach to her Japanese oppressors. God told a Dutch clockmaker's daughter to forgive her German Nazi captors who imprisoned her family for protecting Jews from the Nazis. How nice it is if God sends us to a nice place with nice people and nice weather. We naturally prefer not to go to a dangerous or impoverished place, for it is human nature to seek security and comfort. Many missionaries have come to the USA, and I thank God for them, for without them I would probably still be in a life without knowing the grace of Jesus Christ. Are we willing to leave the security and comfort of this nation to bring God's message to people in difficult places who need the gospel message?

God did not strike Jonah down for his rebellion. If I were God, I would've just ignored him and chosen someone else. But God did not give up on Jonah. God pursued Jonah. First, God sent a storm on the sea. The sailors all

prayed to their gods, while Jonah slept below deck. The captain came and rebuked him to call on his god. Believers know the truth and have the privilege to come to God in prayer. But believers are often spiritually asleep when we should be praying--prayers of repentance, and prayers of intercession for others to be saved. Too often we ignore our Christian duty to pray, to urgently and sincerely call on God.

The Gentile sailors discovered that Jonah was the cause of the storm and Jonah declared in verse 9, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Jonah knew the living and true God, the God of Israel, the Maker of heaven and earth. This God is in control of the wind and sea. This God is sovereign over all peoples and nations. Jonah knew this God and he claimed to be a worshiper of this God. However, he was not doing a very good job of living up to his words.

Jonah had a very sacrificial solution to the storm: "Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." (12) The sailors, however, tried to row back to land. Yet the sea grew wilder. Finally, they prayed, "God, forgive us" and then threw Jonah overboard and the raging sea grew calm. As a result, the sailors feared the Lord and made vows and sacrifices to God. A shipload of Gentile sailors became believers in the Lord God, while Jonah was sinking in the sea.

Second, God Saves and Jonah Prays (Ch.2). God sent the storm to show that it is foolish to flee from God. As Jonah was drowning, God sent a huge fish to swallow him. It was not to make him fish food, but to save him by a strange deliverance. Jonah spent three dark and smelly days in the belly of the fish. I'm not sure how he could breathe or not be digested. Clearly it was a miracle. It is a very odd way to save a man and a strange way to get his attention. For God to get some people's attention it takes jail time, or lying in a hospitable bed, or loss of work, or failure, or some other storm or time of confinement or solitude. Jonah could not flee any more in the fish. He could not do what he wanted. He was confined to go wherever the fish went.

From within the fish, Jonah prayed. His prayer was sincere and honest--a prayer in distress, a cry for help, a prayer of praise for God's deliverance, like many of the psalms. Jonah prayed, "you brought my life up from the pit," and he finished saying, "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'"

One Bible scholar called the last words of Jonah's prayer the key phrase of the whole Bible: "Salvation comes from the Lord." Jonah personally experienced God's salvation in this event. Jonah understood that he had been stubborn and rebellious toward God's will. He deserved to perish, but God saved him. God does not delight in judging or punishing rebellious or ignorant people. Rather, God wants to save sinners. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "[The Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." God's people can testify: "Salvation comes from the Lord." Is this your testimony?

On more than one occasion in my life, I almost drowned. But God saved me. On another occasion, I was almost seduced by a loose woman. But God preserved me. I deserved to die many times in my sins and rebellion. But I'm still here by God's saving grace. Most of all, at the very time I was growing in rebellion, a foul mouth, and immorality, God fished me to know him through his word. Throughout the world right now, many students are entering college. Many young people see college as the place to experiment with their sexuality, with drugs, with new ideologies, many things which do not line up with the grace and truth of God. For example, Northwestern University has over 150 student clubs, and many of them openly contradict God's word and Spirit. Do you care? Will you pray for them? Are you helping someone--a friend, a neighbor, a relative--to know God, his love and his word? If the Lord has saved you, is it right for you to be silent or indifferent to the lost and wandering people around you? Jonah was. And he claimed to be a faithful believer in the true God.

II. Jonah's Reluctant Obedience and God's Greater Salvation (Ch.3-4)

First, Jonah Preaches and All Nineveh Repents (Ch.3). After Jonah's prayer, the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah on to dry land. (It was a very obedient fish, unlike Jonah.) This turning point in Jonah's life, was also a turning point for 120,000 people in Nineveh. For it was at this point, that the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." This time Jonah obeyed. He did not run away. He did not argue with God. He obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Why did he obey? It seems that Jonah learned his lesson through the storm training and inside-the-fish solitude. Perhaps he obeyed out of appreciation for God's salvation.

The amazing thing here however, is not so much Jonah's obedience, but God's patience toward Jonah and God's persistence to give the message to Nineveh. Praise the Lord, He's the God of second chances!. We are often not patient like God. When somebody messes up, we don't give them a second chance. We are not so merciful. God, however, is merciful. God is also persistent in his purpose. God pursues his servants and God pursues the lost, even a whole city or nation of lost people.

The people of Nineveh must've been curious to see this Israelite in their town. Perhaps Jonah had bleached skin, thin hair and smelled like a fish. Jonah's message was short and severe: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown (or overturned)." It was a message of judgment. There were no words of "repent or else!" There was no hope in his message, only ominous words of doom and judgment. The city would be destroyed in forty days and that was final. Maybe Jonah expected that after preaching this he would be arrested or killed by an angry mob.

Instead, a miraculous thing happened. The whole town repented. Why? The Bible simply says, "The Ninevites believed God." In other words, they believed that Jonah's message was not his own idea; it was a message from God to them. A fast was proclaimed and they all put on sackcloth. Even the king of Nineveh joined in, putting on sackcloth and issuing a decree for the whole town. The king's decree was one of thorough repentance; everyone was ordered to do four things: fast, put on sackcloth, call urgently on God, and give up their evil ways and their violence. Even their livestock were made to fast and put on sackcloth. And the king's decree added, "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." The king's decree was longer than Jonah's message. Moreover, the king gave hope that God might relent and have compassion on them and not destroy them. In chapter 1, the sailors prayed while Jonah slept. In this chapter, the king proclaimed repentance with hope of salvation, while Jonah just proclaimed a message of judgment.

God was pleased by the Ninevites' response. 3:10 says, "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened." God accepted their sincere repentance and decided not to destroy them. The repentance of Nineveh was a miracle, even greater than the miracle that occurred when Peter preached his Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem and 3000 people repented on that day. Jesus commented on this event saying, "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here" (Mt 12:41). To Jesus, the spiritual condition and response of these Ninevites was much better than his own people's response to him.

God delights when sinners repent. Jesus said, "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Lk 15:10) There must have been great rejoicing in heaven when the city of Nineveh repented. What do we learn here? We learn that God does his own great work wherever his word is preached and his message is given. Apostle Paul said he rejoiced whenever God's word was preached, whether from false motive or true (Php 1:18). God's word will not return to him without accomplishing its purpose (Isa 55:11). The word of God is alive and active; it penetrates the soul; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Ac 4:12). Let's beware of making Bible study a mere transfer of knowledge, especially of our own ideas or conclusions. When we share God's word, let us share God's word. All people and their glory will fade away, but the word of the Lord endures forever (1Pe 1:24-25).

Second, Jonah Pouts and God Teaches (Ch.4). Ideally, Jonah should not have a 4th chapter. After all, the Ninevites repented and heaven rejoiced at the end of chapter 3. How happy we would be if our whole campus or city repented! But Jonah was not rejoicing. Instead, he was furiously angry. In fact, that was why he didn't want to preach to Nineveh in the first place. He thought what happened was very wrong. He thought the Ninevites did not deserve to be forgiven. So he complained in prayer to God, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." Again, Jonah knew God very well in his head, but he had a heart-disconnect with God. He thought God was wrong this time, and he wanted to teach God something. So he threw a temper tantrum and said, "I want to die. Kill me, now."

Most parents would spank their children at this time or give them a time out. What did God do? God asked Jonah a question: "'Is it right for you to be angry?' or, 'Have you any right to be angry?'" Jonah didn't answer. He stomped out of the city, pouting and sat down to see what would happen to the city. He even made himself a little shelter to wait and see. Jonah had proclaimed, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." It seems that Jonah was waiting for his words to be fulfilled. It seems he wanted to see some fire from heaven that would destroy Nineveh, just as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.

Instead, God did a little miracle for Jonah. He sent him a leafy vine plant overnight to give him some shade for his front row seat. And Jonah was so happy about the shade plant! Maybe Jonah said, "Thank you, God, you make me feel so special!" However, the plant was short-lived, for God sent a worm the next day to chew the plant and it withered. Jonah lamented, "Hey, you took away my little plant! Why did you do that?" That was not the end. God sent a scorching east wind and the sun blazed on Jonah's head and he grew faint. He wanted to die, thinking death would be better than life.

At this point God asked another question, "'Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?'" Jonah said he was angry enough to die. Jonah had a real anger problem, which he could not control. Do you know anybody like that? Are you ever like that? To end the story and leave the reader hanging, God counseled Jonah with a short sermon in verses 10-11. The Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left--and also many animals?"

Jonah had concern about a plant which he did not tend, because it concerned his own comfort and happiness. God's concern was much bigger, for the people of Nineveh, who had no moral clue. What is your concern? What matters to you? This past summer I pulled four all-nighters in my 3-week class, simply because I wanted better than a C

grade. One time I stayed up all night playing video games. Some people have died playing video games for several days without stopping. But I cannot say that I have stayed up all night to pray or work on this message. How about you? What are you willing to suffer or sacrifice for? How are you investing your time, your resources and your heartache?

Personally, my concern is so petty and self-centered compared to God's concern and heart. Nationally, we are so proud and nationalistic. For example, the USA won the most Olympic medals. A few American Olympians gave glory to God for their victories. But do we care at all for the 121 countries who received no medals? A Ugandan won the marathon gold medal. It was Uganda's only medal at this Olympics and the 7th medal in Ugandan history. Americans know many trivial things like who divorced or married in Hollywood, sports statistics, the stock market, or the latest movie or song. But do we care about people or nations where Christ is not known, or where people are not finding life and salvation in Him? God is not pro-American and he does not support one political party as some would like to believe. God's heart is to save all peoples of all nations, for they are all his children. Some of them do not know his love or salvation. Then how can we love and help them? We cannot help them by exporting materialism or pleasure-seeking. We must bring them the greatest story of God's love and mercy.

There was another prophet who was asleep on a boat in a storm. The passengers were also frightened and woke the sleeping prophet. This prophet was not running away from the Lord. He was not thrown overboard to calm the storm. He woke up and rebuked the storm and it became calm. This man had the mind and heart of the Lord. Like Jonah, he also was from Galilee, from a town just 3 miles from Jonah's hometown. Like Jonah, this prophet also had a mission to preach God's message to turn people from their wickedness. This man was not angry or reluctant but preached God's message faithfully. His concern was God's concern. His compassion was God's compassion.

Finally this man had to go through a storm which he wouldn't be able to calm or escape. He had to go down in this storm, down to the grave, in the clutches of death. Like Jonah in the belly of the fish, he was in the heart of the earth. And like the fish had to vomit Jonah, Death could not keep its prey, for this man tore the bars away. Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph over his foes. He arose. He arose. Hallelujah, Christ arose! This is the message of salvation for all who repent and believe the good news. This message is for all people, both for those living in wickedness and ignorance of God like the Ninevites, and for those who know God but who are living in rebellion or reluctance or anger like the prophet Jonah. Salvation comes from the Lord. Praise the Lord for his concern. Should not his people share his concern?