

TEACH US TO PRAY: JONAH

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Jonah 3:10-4:4

Today, I bring you the fifth installment in this sermon series called Teach Us To Pray. In this series we are looking at various prayers that we find within the pages of our holy scripture—prayers lifted up to God by people of faith—moments when people open their hearts and pour out their souls to the Lord. Hannah prayed for a child; Elijah prayed for the comfort of death; Paul prayed that the faithful in Ephesus would be filled with divine wisdom; and Solomon prayed for the wisdom to lead his people as king.

Today we come to the fantastic story of Jonah, who, because he is angry with God, prays that God will take his life. Listen as I read a portion of Jonah's prayer, *I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.* That is his prayer.

To understand why Jonah would pray such a prayer—a prayer for his death, a prayer spoken in anger—we need to go back to the beginning. The tale of Jonah begins like this: *Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah... saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."* God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh and deliver the message that because of their sinfulness, God is going to bring judgment on them.

Technically, this command from God establishes Jonah to be a prophet—one sent by God to speak God's holy word. But Jonah, as we will see, has got to be the most inept prophet ever. Upon hearing God's call to go to Nineveh, Jonah proceeds to the port at Joppa and locates a ship headed for Tarshish—not Nineveh. Nineveh is northeast of Israel in modern Iraq while Tarshish is to the far west in what would be modern Spain. Jonah is fleeing from God by heading in the opposite direction God has sent him. He buys a ticket for what literally to the people of the time was the end of the world. It is as if God sent one of us to Baltimore and we hopped a plane for Anchorage instead. That is what Jonah did.

Once at sea, God sends a terrible storm against Jonah's ship which threatened to sink it. The sailors appeal to their own individual gods for relief. They jettison their cargo attempting to save the ship. But the storm raged on. Jonah, meanwhile, is asleep in the belly of the ship oblivious to all that is going on.

With their demise fast approaching, the sailors decide to cast lots to determine the cause of this storm. Casting lots was a method of determining divine intent. In other words, whose God is responsible for this storm? The lot falls on Jonah, and the sailors demand to know why his God is angry. Jonah confesses to the men saying, *I*

am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. The sailors are terrified. They know that Jonah is running from his God. They ask what they should do, and Jonah tells them they should pitch him overboard. The sailors refuse and keep fighting the storm, but the storm never relents. Finally, the sailors pray to Jonah's Lord and ask for forgiveness as they throw Jonah into the sea. The storm dies down and the men continue to pray and make offerings to God.

Jonah finds himself alone in the water and sure to perish, but God sends a giant fish that swallows him up. Jonah lives in the belly of this fish for three days. While inside the fish, Jonah prays. This is not our prayer for today, but another prayer. Once Jonah has prayed, the fish vomits him up onto dry land and God reiterates the command that Jonah go to Nineveh. Jonah complies.

Nineveh was a great city in the Assyrian empire. It had been an enemy of Israel for generations. The Israelites considered the Ninevites to be evil and wicked. It is a city to be avoided. Jonah, reluctantly, goes there under orders by God.

At this point, I have to emphasize out that Jonah is unlike any other prophet that we find in scripture. When God speaks, prophets obey. Think of Isaiah saying, *Here I am; send me* (Isaiah 6:8). Or Amos, sent by God to Israel. Amos obeys God and goes to the very heart of Israel's capital and preaches lengthy indictments against the people there. But not Jonah. He strolls a short distance into the city and delivers his message. In Hebrew, the entirety of his proclamation is just five words. All Jonah says is, *40 days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.* It is not clear if he even bothered to repeat the message.

It does not matter because the message took hold. The sinful, wicked, violent, pagan people of Nineveh *believed God.* Despite his lack of effort, Jonah's words had an impact. The people fasted and put on sackcloth. The king himself donned sackcloth and sat in ashes as a sign of his repentance. The king proclaimed a fast for humans and animals and decreed that all *shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.* The king speculates to his people, *Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.* Somehow, despite Jonah's half-baked approach, the people got the word.

Twice now, in this short story, without even trying, Jonah has led pagan people to the Lord. First, it was the sailors and now the Ninevites. God works in mysterious ways.

When God sees what is happening with the Ninevites—how they were showing repentance—God changes his mind and decides not to destroy the city. God has mercy on Nineveh.

And this brings us to Jonah's prayer today. Jonah is angry with God for not eradicating the Ninevites. Jonah believes they deserve to be wiped off the face of the earth. They are wicked and evil and the sworn enemies of Israel. The Israelites, on the other hand, are God's chosen people. Nineveh should not be spared. It should be smited.

But God does not smite this city, so Jonah prays our prayer for today saying, *Lord, I knew you were going to do this. That's why I fled from you in the first place. I knew you were gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. So, Lord, you might as well take my life now. I'd rather die than live.*

That is his prayer. Jonah simply cannot live in a world where he can't count on his God to be vengeful for him.

The book of Jonah concludes with the story about the bush. I like to think of this story as a parable. After Jonah prays for God to take his life, God asks, *Is it right for you to be angry?* This is the central question here—should Jonah be angry that God is merciful? Should Jonah be angry that God shows mercy to the people of Nineveh?

Should we ever be angry that God shows mercy on our enemies, on those different from us, on those we may look down upon? If we are honest, we know that too often we feel a twinge of resentment when someone appears to get something for nothing. We want the best for our friends and family, but that is about it. If God is handing out goodies, those goodies should come to us—God's people.

After praying, Jonah walks out past the edge of the city and sets up camp. He constructs a hut to sit under while he waits to see what God will do to Nineveh. Jonah is going to be out in the hot sun, so God appoints a bush to grow and provide him with shade. The bush grows quickly and makes Jonah happy. Then God kills the bush and in one night it withers away. The next day, God sends a hot wind and under the blazing sun Jonah sizzles. Again, Jonah asks to die. He is angry about that bush. God speaks to Jonah and points out that Jonah is all concerned about a bush that he did not plant and which had a short life. If Jonah gets all worked up over one weed, then why can't God get worked up for the thousands of people down in Nineveh. If the plant is so valuable to Jonah, then how much more valuable are the Ninevites to God? Earlier, Jonah confessed to the sailors that God is the creator of all things. This would seem to include the Ninevites.

The purpose of this sermon series is to look at these prayers of scripture and ask what we can learn from them. But as we look at Jonah's prayer, honestly, there is not much to learn. Jonah is the George Costanza of prophets. To succeed as a prophet, one should do the opposite of Jonah. When God calls, Jonah runs; Jonah is indifferent to other people. He gives up easily. He rejects God's grace and mercy. As

an Israelite, he does not seem to understand the Lord. When God gives him a message, he delivers it with all the enthusiasm of a cold shower. He is a terrible prophet, and yet despite himself, he brings an entire metropolis to repent.

How much are we like Jonah? We claim to be God's prophets and we have committed ourselves to God. But as God's people, are we resentful when others, who are different than us, appear to become the recipients of God's blessing? Can just anyone receive the blessing of salvation, or should it be given to us alone?

To be like Jonah is to believe that God's love is a zero-sum game—that if one person receives God's blessings, there will be less for me. While Jonah confesses that God abounds in love, he cannot abide by the Ninevites gaining God's mercy.

The challenge of the Jonah story is not just to profess that God's love is infinite but to fully embrace that belief in our hearts. We must accept that God's love is God's to give and not ours to hoard.

This fantastic story of Jonah is not meant to impress us with the sterling qualities of its protagonist. Rather, when we look at Jonah we are meant to recognize the reflection of our own sins in his flaws and shortcomings.

A good question that we need to ask ourselves is “Am I being like Jonah? Am I angry that God is gracious to others? Or Can I celebrate the sharing of God's infinite love with all?”