

APPRECIATING GOD'S PLANS: LESSONS FROM JONAH

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The book of Jonah is a short one, but it teaches some significant lessons about accepting and rejoicing in God's plans. Jonah had no confidence in what God told him to do, so God found it necessary to take strong measures to teach Jonah some needed lessons.

1) Excuses & Disobedience (Jonah 1:1-8)

When God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, he was giving him a difficult and frightening job. At the time, Nineveh was the center of the powerful and feared Assyrian empire, and the Assyrians were known for their violent attacks on other nations as well as the cruelly imaginative tortures they inflicted on their enemies. So it is understandable that Jonah would not wish to go. But God had given him the job as part of an important plan, not as a whim, and not to make Jonah feel bad, and so God took measures to ensure that Jonah would go after all. Jonah headed in the direction exactly opposite from where God had sent him, and thought he could hide. But God knew where he was, and sent a powerful storm in the path of Jonah's ship. While the crew tried desperately to save the ship, Jonah slept below deck, trying to hide his responsibility from humans as well as from God. But soon God revealed Jonah's responsibility. (Jonah 1:1-8) Some lessons from this part of Jonah:

(i) God's commands are clear, and no excuses are sufficient to disobey them. God speaks with perfect clarity and complete authority. Whether the command is "Go to Nineveh and preach", "Repent and be baptized", "Not even a hint of sexual immorality", or any other, God's Word speaks clearly, without vagueness, and it comes with authority, as God proved to Jonah. It is not relevant whether God's plans agree with our wishes, nor whether we think God's commands are "fair". Here, no one else was required to go to Nineveh, but this neither justified Jonah's disobedience nor exempted him from punishment for that disobedience.

(ii) Disobeying God will not lead to happiness. Jonah did not gain in the long run by his disobedience, and neither will we. Whether God chooses to expose our sin immediately (as he did with Jonah), or to wait until a later time (as he did when David committed adultery), we will never "get away with it". And while we wait, vainly hoping that the sin will remain hidden, our relationship with God is superficial, distant and joyless, even if this is hidden from other humans. Worse, others can suffer. Jonah's one sin not only brought fear and danger to a whole ship full of persons, it deprived many souls in Nineveh of hearing the Word of God.

(iii) Accepting responsibility becomes more difficult as disobedience is prolonged. Many believers rationalize a delay in acting on God's commands because they convince themselves that waiting will make it easier to accept a command that is now unattractive. This is always a delusion, because deferring obedience to God always makes it easier to have a hardened heart and attitude, as Jonah did, and makes it harder for God to tell us what he wants. Note how Jonah is able to sleep peacefully, while the crew is suffering danger and terror because of his sin!

2) Consequences of Sin (Jonah 1:9-16)

Now the crew knows that the storm is Jonah's fault, and must decide what to do. In questioning him, they find that he is a worshiper of Yahweh (the Lord) but that he has disobeyed Yahweh's instructions. Note that many ancient pagans had a fear of the living God, even if they worshiped their own idols, because they had often heard of some of the more spectacular Old Testament miracles. God says that, because of Jonah's disobedience, they must throw him overboard for the storm to stop. They are reluctant to do this, and try desperately to row even harder against the wind.

But the harder they try, the worse the sea gets. Finally they realize that there is no alternative; they throw Jonah overboard, and immediately the storm stops. This makes a great impression on the sailors, who offer sacrifices and vows to the true God. (Jonah 1:9-16) Important lessons:

(i) Confessing sin doesn't always exempt us from sin's consequences. Jonah finally confessed his sin, but God still disciplined him further. When we have permitted disobedience to persist over time, we may have to accept further discipline even after confessing the sin. Often disobedience creates negative consequences that cannot be avoided. At other times, as with Jonah, God must discipline us further to fully impress upon us what we have done. This is another reason to repent of disobedience to God as soon as we see a hint of it; it also shows how serious it is to God that we truly understand the importance of obeying him.

(ii) Trying to get out of sin's consequences only makes matters worse. The crew, though Jonah had endangered them, really wanted to avoid hurting him. They did their best to get to shore without throwing him overboard, even though God had told them to, but this only made things worse. When we try to shield either ourselves or others from sin's consequences, whether this is out of self-interest (wanting the sinner to "like" us), or out of mistaken compassion, we do no one any favors. Too many people today want to avoid ever "making someone feel bad", and have a misplaced pity towards those who suffer for their own sins. God is the one who gave us the capacity to feel guilt, and guilt (properly channeled) is important in keeping us from wandering away from God.

(iii) God is able to use any situation in some positive way. God can always adapt his plans when humans resist him. God wanted to use Jonah to proclaim his message to Nineveh, but since Jonah resisted, God used him in a different way. The unbelieving sailors who saw God's disciplining hand at work were moved to worship. Of course, it is in our own interest as well as God's to be ready to submit to God's "Plan A", rather than forcing God to use us in an alternative way as he did with Jonah, but it is encouraging to know that God is willing and able to use even our mistakes in a constructive way.

3) Genuine Repentance (Jonah 1:17-2:5)

The crew feared that Jonah would drown in punishment for his disobedience, but God had a better plan. God had prepared a giant fish to swallow him. God never intended to destroy Jonah, but at the same time was going to make sure he learned something. While inside the fish, Jonah begins to realize what has happened, and begins for the first time to communicate directly with God through

prayer. He expresses the despair and fear he now feels. Among his fears is that he shall not again be able to live in God's presence. (Jonah 1:17-2:4) Lessons from this portion:

(i) The aim of God's discipline is repentance and renewed closeness, not punishment for its own sake. Certainly God could have let Jonah drown, and then could simply have picked someone else to go to Nineveh. God's goal, though, was not to hurt Jonah, but to help Jonah repent. So his further discipline in the fish, though surely not pleasant for Jonah, was to enable Jonah, who had already come to a partial acceptance of his responsibility, to come to a full repentance and to rededicate himself to God. When we are convicted of our own disobedience, it is important to remember that God only disciplines us as far as is necessary to bring us to full repentance. God never enjoys punishment, no matter how bad the sin is.

(ii) The way to truly repent or to change spiritually is to communicate directly with God. Jonah has finally learned this lesson. Real repentance does not consist of outward acts, but of change in our relationship with God, our attitude and perspective. That is why God put Jonah in the fish: Jonah needed to communicate with God, so God created a situation that encouraged Jonah to do so. Whenever you have spiritual difficulties, seek out a place without distractions (it doesn't have to be inside a fish!) and talk openly to God. Express what you really feel (even negative thoughts, since he knows you have them) so that you can realize his presence, and realize that he wants you to know him better. No amount of activity or of discussing your problems with other humans will ever replace personal communication with God.

(iii) Our one real need is to live in God's presence. When Jonah was tossed into the sea and sank to the waiting fish, many things went through his mind. But the greatest of his fears was that he might not again be able to live in God's presence. Worse than the physical fear and pain, and even worse than his humiliation before the sailors, was the thought that he might have had his last chance to see God's temple or to serve God. At last he remembers what his life is about! Whatever else we may value can be ruined, lost or stolen, but when our desire is to know God and to serve him, Satan himself cannot take that away.

4) Jonah's Time of Refreshing (Jonah 2:6-9)

As Jonah continues to pray, his thoughts turn from the horrors he has experienced to the deliverance that God brings. He acknowledges God's ability to save from even the deepest pits, and also realizes that his prayers have reached God in spite of his sins. The arm of the Lord is never too short to save! Jonah also considers the future: he has learned that clinging to idols, or vain earthly objects and desires, brings disappointment and eventual disaster. Jonah pledges himself to a life filled with hymns of praise, with sacrifices and vows to God, and with victories dedicated to God. He has regained a godly perspective on his life and, having changed inside, is ready to resume his ministry. (Jonah 2:5-9) Lessons to remember:

(i) No earthly pain or fear compares with God's power or the joy of knowing God. (See also Romans 8:18-25.) Life is not about avoiding negative things. To make life worth living, we must have positive goals. We should not seek God merely in the hope that he will bail us out of our earthly troubles. The joy we feel when we see God a little more clearly, or when God does help us

out of some difficulty, is a glimpse of the greater and more lasting joy that we will feel when we go home to be with him forever. All our experiences here should be viewed in this light, and we should submit to God's eternal plans even when our worldly plans conflict with them.

(ii) We must choose between our vain idols and God's grace. Jonah says this in verse 8; whenever we cling to a vain earthly possession or goal we are missing out on the more eternal blessings God has to offer. Since worldly things are right in front of our eyes, we often grab them without thinking, but the real blessings are the eternal ones. Like Jonah, we often don't think preaching the Word or ridding our lives of sin will make us happy, so we instead fight to get worldly distinctions or temporary comforts. Satan will give you as many of these as you're willing to take, but in taking them you're missing out on fully knowing God. Humans have many ways of deluding themselves into thinking that they can have both, but instead we should accept that all we need is God's grace (2 Cor. 12:9).

(iii) When we submit to God's plans, everything else is a joy. Notice Jonah's new positive perspective on everything. He is ready to accept responsibilities and to make vows to God, fully intending to fulfill them. He wants to sacrifice to God and wants to share in victories for God's sake, not his own. All these changes come from one root change he has made: he has accepted that God is the Master and that God's ways are right. Jonah now has the closeness to God and the confidence in God that will enable him to face outward challenges.

5) A Solid Foundation For Ministry (Jonah 2:10-3:4)

God now commands the fish to release Jonah, and the fish spews him onto land. God gives the same command to Jonah that he gave in 1:2, but this time Jonah is ready to obey. Without hesitation, he not only goes to Nineveh to preach, he makes a whole day's journey into Nineveh itself and begins to preach exactly as God intended him to. Jonah fearlessly walks into the most powerful, violent and wicked city of his day and proclaims loudly that the city is to be destroyed! (Jonah 2:10-3:4) Important lessons from this portion of Jonah:

(i) God will not change his commands for us, but we have to adapt ourselves to God's commands. After all that Jonah had been through, and after all the changes he made in his attitude, God comes back with exactly the same command that started Jonah's rebellion. Everything that had happened didn't change what God wanted. So too for us, if there is a command or principle in the Scripture that we don't want to deal with now, it will never go away. Even if we diligently make other changes, obey other commands, or go through other trials, God is not going to rescind any of his commands just because someone doesn't like one. A principle or instruction you don't like will always be there, so the most beneficial thing in the long run is just to accept God's authority right away. If you don't, God will have to use discipline as he did with Jonah, and after that is done, he will give you the same instruction over again.

(ii) With the right foundation, dramatic outward change is possible. Jonah not only does something he previously refused to do, he does it with energy and without delay. He made this dramatic outward change because of the inward changes he worked through in his time with God. Merely trying to be outwardly obedient to God will not result in true, lasting change, whereas a genuine

spirit of reverent submission in our hearts enables us to do all that God asks, even if our physical bodies resist or struggle.

(iii) Preach the message just as God gives it to us. Even Jesus said "I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself commanded me what to say and how to speak." (John 12:49) Jonah neither watered down the message God gave him nor added his own opinions to it, but preached exactly what God told him to. Of course we know that this achieved a favorable response, but Jonah didn't know at the time what would happen. For all he knew, he might get imprisoned or tortured by the violent, pagan Assyrians. It is never up to us to try to decide what message will get the best response, or what message will be the most popular. Whether we are speaking to other believers or to the lost, we should resolve to "know nothing but Christ and him crucified".

6) A Victory For God's Grace (Jonah 3:5-10)

Jonah's stern message to the cruel, wicked Ninevites drew a dramatic and surprising response. They all repented, humbled themselves by fasting and wearing sackcloth, and begged God not to carry out the threatened punishment. The king himself, when he heard about Jonah's preaching, humbled himself in the same way, and decreed a city-wide repentance. It is hard to grasp the magnitude of this event - here was the world's most powerful, ungodly city, with the most ruthless leader of the time, crying out to God in complete conviction of their sin, just because of one preacher! It was a greater conversion than if one Christian were to walk into Baghdad or Teheran and convert the whole city, including Saddam Hussein or the Ayatollah, without resistance. Because of the depth and sincerity of the Ninevites' repentance, God did not destroy the city. Jonah, because of his obedience, was able to share in one of God's most striking victories. (Jonah 3:5-10)

Key applications:

(i) God wants everyone to be saved. Just as the punishment God gave to Jonah was not for punishment's sake itself, but to bring Jonah back to God, God didn't threaten Nineveh with destruction for destruction's sake either. It was in the hope (slim though it may have been) that Nineveh would repent. God did not decide for himself whether or not the Ninevites would repent; he just gave them the chance and let them decide. Once they repented, they had a fresh start with God. God has this attitude towards everyone, so we should never decide that anyone cannot possibly be saved. You should never think this about yourself, either. No matter what horrible shortcomings you have, one genuine repentance is enough to give you a fresh start.

(ii) Immediate repentance is the easiest way for us, and the most pleasing to God. The Ninevites' prompt response contrasts sharply with Jonah's own resistance to God's Word. In so responding, they saved themselves the kind of extended discipline (or, possibly, quick annihilation) that Jonah subjected himself to. Certainly the actions the Ninevites took must have felt humiliating, but the sincerity in these actions showed a response from the heart, which God will always appreciate.

(iii) God's forgiveness cannot be earned. Take a look at what the king and the others did. God did not forgive them because they did something wonderful, nor even because they promised to do so. It wasn't because they said just the right words, or because they had a good explanation of why they

had sinned. The only way to receive God's forgiveness is simply and humbly to accept that we are sinners, and acknowledge this before God. These people showed with their actions that their repentance was genuine, and we also should "prove our repentance with our deeds", but always remember that the outward actions, even confession, do not earn forgiveness.

7) A Step Backwards (Jonah 4:1-5)

But Jonah does not rejoice in this victory. He instead becomes depressed and angry, because he was actually hoping to see God destroy Nineveh (either out of hatred towards them as Israel's enemies, or out of desire to see a spectacle). Jonah even turns this against God, saying that he knew this would happen all along, so why was it necessary for poor old Jonah to have to go through so much? Jonah rationalizes his past disobedience, and at the same time questions God's need to send him to Nineveh. Jonah goes outside the city to sit and mope, still hoping that something exciting or interesting will happen. (Jonah 4:1-5) Some applications:

(i) Submission to God is not once-for-all, but must be an ongoing attitude. We have seen how Jonah underwent a genuine, root repentance from his earlier poor attitudes, and how he had come to rejoice in submission to God's plan. But now here he is again with an even worse perspective: before he had just neglected his duty, but now he actively wants to see penitent sinners get destroyed. A dramatic repentance is only guaranteed to last until the first trial. To remain submissive to God's plans, we must constantly be ready to deal with a new challenge or command, and must not ever think that we are immune to even the most base of sins. Look how quickly Jonah changes!

(ii) Great achievements are not necessarily a sign of great faith or a good heart. This is one of the most dramatic events in the Bible, a mass repentance of "unconvertible" pagans. It came about, though, not because of a human's great faith or good heart, but because of God's will that they have a chance to repent, and because of the Ninevites' own humble response. Do not ever think that, because God allows you to share in his victories, you have done something to earn it. God leads people to him for the converts' own sake, not to show certain Christians his favor.

(iii) We must let God's will reign in order to enjoy his intended blessings. God and Jonah had both decided what should happen to Nineveh. God intended to give a blessing not only to the penitent citizens, but also a smaller one to Jonah, who could enjoy participating in God's victory. But Jonah already had determined in his mind that he would get to see a show of God's power against the city, so his response to the change of plans was not joy, but anger. When we have set in our minds that God must act in a certain way, we are probably not only going to be disappointed in our desire, we're also likely to miss out on something better. Let God decide what to do! The blessings he has planned for us are probably a lot better than the ones we desire for ourselves.

8) Open Your Eyes (Jonah 4:6-11)

God does do something - he teaches Jonah another lesson. This time, at least, it doesn't have to be so extraordinary. God sends a gourd vine that grows around Jonah's shelter, and gives him some

pleasing shade, but then he quickly takes away the vine. Jonah now feels even sorer for himself, and wants to die, feeling he has nothing to live for. God uses Jonah's feeling of loss over a mere plant to explain why God himself was right to be so concerned for humans, made in his own image. (Jonah 4:6-11) Some final applications from our study of Jonah:

(i) Self-centeredness leads to unhappiness. We put ourselves first so often because we think it will make us happy. We think that our self-pity will force both God and other humans to do something for us. But instead, self-pity results in making us unhappy and unappreciative of what we have. Look at Jonah's situation objectively - was there any real reason for such depression? Neither is there usually any real reason for our own self-centeredness or self-pity. The challenge is to see ourselves objectively, as God always does.

(ii) God disciplines us out of love and a desire that we understand him. Once again, here is God "making Jonah feel bad" by disciplining him. God does not desire us to be unhappy, but neither does he consider it a tragedy. We humans, on the other hand, are so self-centered that we often assume that any time we're unhappy it is a calamity that must be addressed immediately. Temporary pain or unhappiness is often necessary for God to lead us to greater faith and devotion. If we weren't so short-sighted and rebellious, he wouldn't have to use so much discipline, but he is not going to give up trying to get through to us. We often moan and whine about God's discipline, but the real disaster for us would be if God ever gave up and stopped disciplining us!

(iii) We must submit not only to God's plans, but also to his priorities. The main reason Jonah had so much trouble obeying God was that he never accepted all of God's priorities; he never learned to see things from God's viewpoint. If he had seen the Assyrians with God's eyes, he would not have struggled so much with accepting God's plans for them. If you ever struggle with doing something God wants you to do, consider carefully the way you look at it and feel about it. God wants not only outward obedience, but wants us to rejoice in his plans, to put his interests (which are really yours, in the long run) ahead of what you (usually mistakenly) think will make you happy this very moment. And there are many reasons to rejoice in obedience to God, if we open our eyes and hearts to understand God's ways a little better.

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