

NOT THEE!

The Choice You Make in the Shade | Not That (Part 4)

Text: Jonah 4

Rejoining the Story of Jonah

When we left the story last week, Jonah had completed the mission God had given him. After a period of running from God's call, Jonah finally obeyed the Word of the Lord (Jon 3:1-2). He traveled all the way to Ninevah, the capitol city of Assyria, the nation Israel feared might sweep down and destroy them at any moment. Making his way into the very heart of that terrible place, Jonah told the people of the judgment that God was soon to bring upon them for their well-documented wickedness.

Amazingly, the Assyrians do not kill the messenger. Instead, the Assyrian king and his subjects dress themselves in sackcloth – a visible sign of their humility, sorrow, and repentance – and pray that, somehow, the Lord God might give them a second chance. Which, remarkably, God does. The last verse of chapter 3 reads: **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 (Jon 3:10).**

Now, we know from subsequent history that this act of contrition was going to be fairly short-lived. The Assyrians were like that kid who gets caught doing something bad, anticipates the just consequences, and wails for mercy. The child is given grace. He cleans up his act for a while but, once the scrutiny and threat of punishment dies down, what happens? He goes back to his old ways. Why? Because his heart had not really changed. I've been that kid before. Have you?

In similar fashion, Jonah's message brings about a change in the behavior of the Ninevites but not a real conversion. One clue to this is that we're told in chapter 3 that **"they believed God" (Jon 3:5)**, but the term for God there is the generic word "Elohim" rather than the more personal "Yahweh." In other words, they make their foxhole appeal to something more like Fate, rather than devoting their lives to a personal God. There's no indication in the text that the Ninevites abandoned their idols or local gods at all. We don't see them sacrificing to the Jewish God, as the sailors we met in chapter 1 did. What happened in Ninevah was more like a temporary course correction than a remaking of the nation's spiritual identity. Some time later, the Assyrians will go right back to their murderous ways.

Again, how many times has your repentance or mine been similarly superficial? *"Oh, God, if you get me out of this, I will do THIS for you or I will never do THAT again!"* Think of the many promises we've made to God or somebody else, only to have our core character reassert itself in time. Think how many people flooded into churches after 9/11. Where are they now? Remember, this isn't a surprise to God. He knows this

about us. But so often he chooses to extend his grace and defer his judgment anyway. Hold that thought. We'll come back to it later.

Here's the deal: At least for the moment, the Assyrians have changed in some important way. They haven't beheaded Jonah. They've ceased their warring violence. The daring Summit that nobody thought could possibly work, has gone stunningly well. Israel is safer now and the Assyrians have shown themselves somewhat capable of change. So, Jonah is thrilled, right?! I mean, he's probably tweeting news of his historic success, right?! The answer is in chapter 4...

Playing Pocket God

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, "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. ³ Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jon 4:1-3)

Wow. Jonah would rather die than to have the Assyrians not die. Can you understand that sentiment. On some level, I think I can. It reminds me of something once honestly confessed by Elie Wiesel, the famed survivor of the Nazi Holocaust. *"I composed a prayer,"* he says. *"Literally I composed a prayer, saying, 'God of mercy, have no mercy on these souls—on these murderers of children. God of compassion, have no compassion on those who killed these children.' ...I was criticized all over the world,"* Wiesel continues, *"because [this prayer] was published all over the world. But I felt it—I still feel it. Some persons do not deserve forgiveness."*¹

I don't think you can get the message of the Book of Jonah unless you first sit with that feeling – with that feeling that there are just some people who don't deserve mercy, grace, or forgiveness. Few of us rise to the level of intensity of emotion that Elie Weisel or Jonah did in this way, but this sense that we are entirely justified in writing off certain people is a fundamental part of the human condition. Its behind our millennia-old ability to commit genocide, to wage war, to walk into a bar or a school and gun people down. It's the sentiment at the root of our ability to ignore the plight of whole groups of people, or to refuse to consider any longer some party's point of view. We come to believe that it's not only OK to do that; it is right to do so.

One of the best-selling apps of the handheld device revolution is a game enticingly titled, POCKET GOD. The game makes you the supreme deity over a little island inhabited by residents called "pygmies." Among the options available to you as God is the opportunity to go bowling for islanders with a huge boulder or to use pygmies as bait for shark fishing. You can throw the islanders into volcanoes if you feel like it our destroy their villages with earthquakes. The game's description reads: *"What kind of god would you be? Benevolent or vengeful? Play Pocket God and discover the answer*

within yourself.” Perhaps needless to say, the game provides you with a lot more options to torture and destroy the islanders than to refine and redeem them.

The story of Jonah is the story of humanity’s tendency to play that game. And because it is so natural to do this, certain of our rectitude, it is always more than a little disconcerting to run into the Real God. Listen to what God says to Jonah: **But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?” (Jon 4:4).** My instinct would be to say, *“Uh, yeah!! Have you forgotten that these are the baby-bashing Assyrians, God? Extend grace and mercy to those people? C’mon. NOT THAT.”*

But the story goes on: **Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city (Jon 4:5).** The scene reminds of the time that the brilliant educator, Dr. Mortimer Adler, suddenly left a discussion group at a tea quite disgusted with everybody in the room and slammed the door after him. Somebody trying to relieve the tension, remarked, *“Well, he’s gone.”* To which the hostess replied, *“No, he isn’t. That’s a closet.”* Myron Augsberger says: “We share the same plight when we attempt to rush from God’s presence. We are confined to ourselves.”²

How marvelous is it, that God does not leave you and me confined to ourselves? **Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live” (Jon 4:6-8).**

But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.” Jonah is deep in his closet, isn’t he? **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?” (Jon 4:9-11)**

Discerning We Are Lost & Desiring to Be Found

Does this attitude sound at all familiar? I can’t read these words and not think of another story that would transpire approximately 800 years after this one. A certain man would enter into a Great City whose wickedness had come up before God. Though they had been saturated in God’s teachings, blessed with God’s grace far beyond any other people, they practiced only a superficial religion. They tolerated stunning injustice

toward the poor. They thought of themselves as better than any other nation. But as the prophets so often warned, they were far from the heart of God.

When God sent his messenger to turn them back toward himself, they threw the man in chains. He was completely innocent, someone who had come only to bring that city help and hope. And yet, after they had done the sort of things to him that the Assyrians might do -- nearly beating him to death, peeling the skin from his back, driving nails through his hands and feet, this man would nonetheless say: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34).** OR, again... **Should I not have CONCERN for the great city... in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left? (Jon 4:11)**

There is a profound continuity between this famous story in the Old Testament and the most important stories of the New Testament. Tim Keller observes that one of the other places we see that continuity is when we compare the story of Jonah with Christ's most famous story – the parable of the Two Sons. You may recall that in that tale a younger son flees his Father's home and heads off to a far country, lost in his own selfishness. The elder son, stays at home, lost in his own self-righteousness.

Do you see how Jonah is BOTH of these sons? First, he selfishly flees to far off Tarshish, wasting time, squandering his calling, and endangering others. But God, like the Father in Jesus' story never stops feeling CONCERN for him. He turns him around and welcomes him back and restores him to an important role in his work. But then Jonah becomes the Elder brother. He gets self-righteously angry that the Father is giving second chances to selfish people. Like the older brother who stays outside the house refusing to rejoice in his brother's redemption, Jonah sits sulking outside the city, resentful that God is lavishing upon the Assyrians the gracious concern that the Father has just lavished on him.

Like Jonah and those two brothers, all of us are lost in some way, not knowing our right hand from our left. We are more selfish or more self-righteous than we know and often both. If you have trouble identifying where that might be so for YOU, just ask one of your family members! Amazingly, however, God continues to have CONCERN for us, as he had for Jonah and the Ninevites. He continues to pour out more grace and mercy upon us than we deserve or recognize. Why? Partly to give us more time to come around before the final judgment, and partly because He is simply like that: **God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love (Jon 4:2).**

The story of Jonah ends with Jonah sitting in the shade pondering a lingering question about whether God is right to be this way? Beneath it, however, lies an implied deeper one, I think. God is asking Jonah: ***Will you seek to be this way?*** There's a world out there wondering what I am truly like. "I'm sending you to them," says our Heavenly Father. They've seen enough selfish and self-righteous people. Show them MY heart. Go invite them home and into my house. For whom shall I send, if NOT THEE?

Let's pray together...

O God our Father, the cross of Christ, the whole of this magnificent creation, and a billion common graces proclaim the good news that you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. If these things can speak of your glory and draw people to you, then by the way I live in this season ahead, so will I. Amen.

¹ *The Power of Forgiveness*, Journey Films, 2008.

² Myron S. Augsburger, "When Reason Fails," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, no. 9.