

Jonah's Lessons in Evangelism

Jonah 4- The Repentance of the Lord

Passages: Jonah 4
 John 8:1-11

For a lot of people, this fourth chapter of Jonah's story doesn't make any sense. I mean, here's a man who has died and gone to Sheol and back, and yet he still doesn't get it! He still doesn't understand the scope of God's love. And so, *instead of rejoicing* in the miraculous work of God who brought about the repentance and moral transformation of this ruthless, war-mongering nation... *instead of rejoicing* in the resurrection power of God that brought both he and Ninevah back from the dead... all Jonah can do is pout and get angry!

It's no wonder why some Children's Bible finish the story of Jonah at the end of chapter 3, where all of Ninevah repents! They skip chapter 4 because it's such an anticlimax!

We, however, can't skip chapter 4! Why not? Because, in Jonah's attitude towards the Ninevites we see a reflection of Israel's attitude towards the nations. In other words, Jonah chapter 4 stands like a milestone in Israel's history, marking out the fact that, despite all that God was doing amongst the nations to bring them to Himself, Israel still wasn't ready. **Like Jonah, they had no understanding about God's love for the world.**

Recently, someone tried to convince me that the OT God is different to the God of the New Testament. I asked her why she thought that way. She replied that the OT God was an angry deity, filled with wrath and vengeance, while the God of the NT is full of love and mercy. In her mind, therefore, there was no value in studying the OT. It was like reading about another religion altogether!

But, this way of dividing the Old and New Testaments will only get you into trouble! For there is only one God, and He is the same that is found in both the Old and New Testaments. Moreover, **He has always been the God of love!**

Now, you might argue, "*If that's true, then why does the OT God look so different?*" The answer is found in two words: **Progressive revelation.** For the

fact is that although God has never changed, human perceptions of Him have changed! And not only have human perceptions of God changed, they have changed because, over time, God has progressively revealed Himself in ways that have altered our perceptions of Him.

What this means is simple: Although Noah's family may have known a bit more about God than Cain and Abel did, they had less understanding of God than the descendants of Abraham. And although Abraham's descendants knew more than Noah's family, they had less understanding of God than (say) Moses and the Israelites who followed him out of Egypt. And although Moses and the Israelites knew more about God than Abraham, they had less understanding of God than those who lived in the days of (say) King David. And so on, and so forth!

Progressive revelation says that God has progressively intervened in human affairs, gradually shaping and maturing our concepts of Him. This process happened through a long, historic sequence of relational experiences! Those families who kept associating with God over many generations were those who grew in a deeper appreciation of His true character...His loving character! That's progressive revelation!

And this is why Jonah, chapter 4, is such an important part of the story of Jonah. Sure, as far as the excitement of Ninevah's conversion is concerned, it's an anticlimax! But, as far as seeing where Israel was in their understanding of God's love for the world, it's hugely important! After all, Jonah was an Israelite and his ideas about God were built upon the same foundation as most other Israelites in his day. Like the rest, Jonah had grown up on a steady diet of Israel's favourite stories:

- Noah and the flood
- Moses and the Exodus
- The battle of Jericho
- King David and Goliath
- The conquest of the Promised Land

Through all these stories, Jonah got (what he thought was) a clear picture of God's character:

1. **God loves Israel, His righteous people.**
2. **And God hates the ungodly sinners of the world and wants to destroy them!**

It was, in other words, a very black-and-white understanding of God. But, for us who now live so much further along in history, we know that this view of God is **oh so incomplete**, even to the point of being unhelpful!

That's why Jonah 4 is such an important chapter in marking out Israel's history. In Jonah 4, God is trying to take Israel to a new level. He's attempting to force Jonah's mind to consider a new way of thinking about Him. God wants Jonah (and by implication, Israel) to put away his childish, black and white thoughts about God and consider something far bigger than he would have ever contemplated. God wants Jonah (and Israel) to see that He loves every nation...even Assyria, Israel's greatest enemy!

If you get this idea, you'll begin to understand why, in chapter 4, Jonah is so confused...and, out of his confusion, so angry!! God is severely twisting his brain with *progressive revelation*! Just think about it: All his life, he's been taught that God loves only Israel and that He hates the ungodly sinners of this world...especially Israel's enemies! But suddenly, what happens? **God chooses Jonah to be his first missionary to a foreign land!** And not only that, but God sends Jonah to (of all places) Ninevah—the capital city of Assyria! Do you think God knew what He was doing? Of course He did! He was forcing the issue! He was progressively revealing His character!

But did Jonah know what God was doing? Not at all! This was a brand new concept for him (and for Israel).

Well, maybe that's not entirely correct. For those who had eyes to see, this was not a totally new idea! Many times in Israel's history, foreigners had been accepted into the heart of Israel's life. Foreigners could even join Israel in worship, for God had welcomed them in despite their foreign background. So, yes, there had been previous clues given to Israel that God had love for people of other nations.

Added to that was the idea that even Israel was once a foreign nation, and God loved her! Abraham was called “a wandering Aramean”, yet God still accepted him!! These were just some of the many clues given by God which revealed His love for the world. Sadly, Israel hadn’t taken much notice of them!

Indeed, you could even say that *God’s loving character* was something that was regularly seen and experienced in Israel! Just think back to the Book of Exodus, to the time when Moses had led Israel up to the foot of Mount Sinai. There, God’s people do something so sinful...so abhorrent... that God has every right to destroy them! You see, they had fabricated a Golden Calf and began to worship it in the place of the very One who had brought them out of Egypt.

But, what does God do? Instead of destroying them, He comes to them and describes to them His true character: ***“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”***

This is progressive revelation! For up until this point, few people in Israel would have ever imagined that God could forgive sinners like that! Up until this point, Israel’s knowledge of God was still very immature—black and white—tit for tat—filled with ideas of retaliation and vengeance!! Gradually, God’s true character is beginning to be understood. Progressive revelation!

But notice one thing—this new understanding of God’s love still only translated to **a love for Israel** (and, of course, those foreigners who joined Israel) -- **No one else!** Israel saw it as an exclusive love. And this understanding continued until the day of Jonah!

So, let’s get back to chapter 4 of Jonah. As we’ve seen, Jonah is very aware that God has spared the Ninevites, causing them to repent and bringing them into His arms! God has told these ruthless enemies of Israel that they are, now, accepted as His children! God has shown His love to Ninevah!

Now, listen to what Jonah says (and take careful note of the text he is quoting from!): ***“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.”***

Do you see why Jonah ran away? Do you see why Jonah would rather die than see Ninevah be saved and loved by God? **Jonah is having a hard time accepting this huge paradigm shift in his thinking about God!** God is twisting his brain...turning it inside out with this new (yet quite old) revelation about His love for the world.

Have you ever gone through a **paradigm shift** in your thinking? Not only can it be an earth-shattering experience; it can be extremely painful, for it forces us to admit how foolish we've been in the past...in our old way of thinking. It humbles us to admit that we were wrong! *"We saw but through a glass dimly!"*

Jonah is being forced to undergo a paradigm shift—a shift in everything He has believed about God. And that's why he pouts! That's why he gets angry! That's why he builds himself a shelter outside Ninevah, to watch and wait and see; for deep inside, he still hopes that God will destroy Ninevah. After all, won't He see what they are really like? Won't He see that they are not worthy of His love? Jonah waits.

And here's where one of God's greatest instruments of *progressive revelation* (one that Jesus used quite a lot) kicks in—It's called a parable (although, in this case, it is, quite literally, a *living parable*). God causes a vine to grow up over Jonah and give him shade from the scorching sun. But at dawn the next day, God sends a worm to chew the vine and destroy it.

And the lesson that Jonah is supposed to learn from all this? The vine was given to Jonah as a gift. It came to him from God, without any labouring on Jonah's part to earn it, produce it or make it grow! This vine was all of God's goodness. Of course, when the vine was gone, Jonah got angry, claiming it as his 'right'. But, was it? Was Jonah correct in assuming that he deserved any of God's good gifts?

And here's the point—In the same way that Jonah could never merit God's love or favour or gifts, neither did the Assyrians merit God's love or favour or gifts. Indeed, it was never a question of merit; **never!** The idea of meriting God's love is an immature idea...a childish idea...and one that needs to be left behind as we discover the true character of God and His unmerited love for all the people of this world.

There was, of course, one more lesson for Jonah to learn through this little parable. God was teaching Jonah that **He would never be the possession of any one nation!** He will never be our localised talisman! In fact, He never intended to favour Israel in such a way that she would sit back in her shelter and look down on all the other “poor bastards” of this world, waiting for their God to annihilate them.

To the contrary, Israel had been saved from her own *sinking ship*...from the belly of death ...from the gates of Sheol... not to turn inwards on herself in the pride of her own self-worth, but rather to turn outwards, to the nations, as representatives of God’s desire to expand His salvation throughout the world.

And this is why I can say with all certainty that the reason why the story of Jonah is included in our Bibles today is because this chapter of Jonah’s story is a major milestone in the progressive revelation of God’s true character! We can even say that **God chose Jonah for this mission (to personally experience death and the power of resurrection) in order that he might learn more about God’s heart; that he might learn God’s ways; that he might return from Ninevah and become a teacher of Israel, and to introduce a new paradigm about God into Israel’s thinking.**

You might, then, be wondering whether Jonah did go home to Israel and become a teacher of this new paradigm? Well, we don’t really know! However, the way his story ends makes me think that Jonah was, in fact, **too stubborn** to allow God to change his mind.

Even if he did start to change...even if he did finally begin to understand God’s love and went back to Israel to teach others, he surely didn’t do a very good job of it! The testimony of the OT indicates that Israel continued to turn inwards...to believe that she was the only nation worthy of God’s grace and love! She maintained the old paradigm which said, “*God loves the righteous and hates everyone else.*” Until the very end of the OT, Israel never seemed to grow in the knowledge of God’s grace and in the truth of His love for the world!

And, of course, that is why Jesus had to come in due course. It is why the love of God needed to descend to earth and be clothed in human flesh... in the

person of God's Son... in order that the progressive revelation of God's true character might become far more than a verbal message. Jesus came to visibly show us the loving character of God in the fullness of His glory...

John 1: 14, 17-18

These verses highlight the fact that the progressive revelation of God's character finds its apex in Jesus Christ!

- In Jesus, we see a God who loves sinners—like the woman caught in adultery whom Jesus received them with open arms, even before she could repent! Nothing did she merit; her forgiveness was all by grace.
- In Jesus, we see a God who loves strangers and foreigners...people with little or no understanding of Him—the Samaritan woman, the Roman soldier, the demon-possessed man of Geresene.
- In Jesus, we see a God who even loves His enemies, offering kindness in the face of persecution, offering life in the face of death.

Progressive revelation! It's the reason why the OT is so different to the New. It's also the reason why the church of today should be so much clearer about God's love than the church was 1000 years ago.

And this idea brings us back full circle to the subject of **evangelism**. If you remember, back at the beginning of this sermon series, I told you that the story of Jonah is all about **evangelism**. And I'm sure you can see how chapter 4 fits into this theme. Two points:

First, before we can be excited about evangelism, we need an increasing revelation of God's love for the world! But you won't get that until you read the Bible! Read it repeatedly, regularly, and get a fix on the way God has progressively revealed His love to the world.

Secondly, we need to understand that the person we want to see come to Jesus also needs *progressive revelation*! Just as it was in Israel, there are many people in society today who think that God is an angry God...full of wrath and vengeance. (Statistics say that over 40 per cent of people in the USA think this way.) This view is immature and extremely black and white. That's why people need progressive revelation to move them to a better understanding of God's

love. This is what Jonah was supposed to do with Israel...to lead them into this new knowledge. And this is what you are supposed to do with your friends. What you have discovered about God's love is now meant to be passed on!

This is evangelism! Unlike Jonah, let's engage with the world. Unlike Jonah, let's reach out beyond ourselves with a greater appreciation of God's love for all creation.

Let's pray.