Jonah: Is It Right for You to Be Angry?

by Bayless Conley

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Hello, friend. I'm glad that you have joined me. If you've been with us recently, you'll know that we've been talking about the book of Jonah, and it is fascinating. Today we come to the last chapter. There is something in here that is so worthy of our attention that I just want to encourage you, whatever you're doing, if you're distracted and have a few other things going on, even if you are good at multitasking, why don't you put that down and just concentrate with me for the next few minutes on God's Word.

Now, Jonah has been sent by God to the city of Nineveh, that great capital of the Assyrian Empire, to preach to them that in forty days they are going to be destroyed. God's judgment is coming upon them because of their wickedness. Much to Jonah's chagrin—he didn't want it to happen, but they listened to the message and they repented. From the lowliest person on the street all the way to the king in his palace, they repented, fasted, cried out mightily to God, and asked God for mercy. God chose to be merciful to them.

Now, you would think that Jonah would have been so elated. You talk about effective preaching. You talk about a revival. Jonah should have just been jumping up and down and joyful, thinking about how God used him to spare this giant capital city in Assyria. But that's actually not what happened. I want to read to you from Jonah 4:1. When Jonah saw that the whole country, from the king on down, repented and cried out to God and that God was having mercy on them, that they wouldn't be destroyed, this is how Jonah responds. Jonah 4:1 NKJV,

> [1] But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.

Isn't that interesting? It goes on in verses 2–3 and says,

> [2] So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. [3] Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"

Jonah wanted to die. He was so angry at what had happened and the fact that God had shown mercy to them. Truly, it may have been because the Assyrians were the enemies of Israel. Maybe Jonah, being a prophet, had some insight into the fact that in the future the Assyrians would be part of Israel's undoing, which certainly happened. The nation was carried away into Assyrian captivity in the future. Maybe Jonah, just like all the rest of the known world then, knew how wicked the Assyrians were.

We have talked about this in previous messages, but they were one of the most savage peoples who have ever lived on the face of the earth. When the Romans would come in and conquer a region, they would have garrisons in the city to maintain Roman law and to keep everyone under their thumb. So they would leave Roman troops there.

The Assyrians typically wouldn't do that. If they conquered a city, they would kill everybody. They would skin the men alive and then hang their skins on the city walls. They would impale people while they were alive and put them on poles all around the city walls. Everyone was afraid to rebel against them because they were just so wicked and so savage.

It may have been those things, a combination of those things, that Jonah is thinking. "I want these people to die. I want them to be judged." It says that he was displeased exceedingly, and he was angry, very angry.

It's interesting, the word *displeased* is derived from a verb meaning "to be bad or to be evil." The word *angry* comes from a verb meaning "to burn or to be kindled." Jonah is literally burning with anger over God showing mercy to them. Jonah thought that it was bad or that it was evil that they were being spared. He didn't think it was right, and he was literally burned up with anger about it.

Sometimes people around us get blessed, and we know their story. We know what they have done. We know the kind of people that they have been, and we're not happy when they get blessed. Sometimes we don't think it's fair. We don't think it's right. Maybe we feel like they don't deserve it. Jonah's response is not too different than the response of many people whom I have known. And to be completely transparent with you, looking at my own heart, I remember once there was a guy, and I knew him nominally.

We were acquainted. We had talked. We had been in some of the same preaching environments together, and I didn't like the guy. He was arrogant. I remember a very, very close friend of mine sought counsel from him one time, and when I found out the counsel that he'd been given, I pulled my friend aside. I said, "Listen, do not do that. That is just exactly what a bully would do, and it's not right. It violates the Spirit of Christ. It's not the way." It had to do with some staff members and some things that were going on.

I said, "I know you. I know your church. I know the spirit of the house. That is so opposed to the very spirit of the house, and it's just so different than who you are." I was grateful that he listened to me. But truth be told, I was upset that this guy had given such counsel, not knowing the people who were involved, not really knowing the full circumstances, and it would have ended up hurting the church. It would have hurt this guy if he would have followed those instructions. But it's kind of the way the guy was. He was a bully. He was arrogant.

Well, anyway, it came out that guy had been involved in multiple adulterous relationships, and it literally was a mess. He ended up losing his church and losing his ministry. It wasn't something that was done in a corner. I'll just put it that way. Then here, not too long ago, I'd heard some things and done a little bit of digging, and the guy completely repented of being a liar, being an adulterer, and of the attitudes that he harbored. He repented. God restored his marriage. He has been blessed.

Now, he's not pastoring a church any longer, but his marriage has been blessed. He has been blessed when it comes to money. God has given him a platform in a different way to what he previously had, and he's actually having great influence. I took a look at my own heart, and I wasn't happy. I wasn't rejoicing that God had been kind to him. I wasn't rejoicing at the mercy of God displayed in his life once he repented. It's like I kind of wanted to see him punished some more, and I thought, "Bayless, you are not too different than Jonah," and I had to ask for God's forgiveness and to repent.

Sometimes, we look at someone maybe who has done us wrong, we know about their sordid history, we know the way they have been, and we kind of relish that they're being punished or that things are not going well for them. But if they repent, and God is merciful and kind to them, He restores them and blesses them, sometimes we're a little bit late in our rejoicing.

I just want to encourage you and challenge you to maybe take a look at your own heart. Do you rejoice when God is merciful, when He's kind, or would you rather see people punished? Jonah was so eaten up with his anger. He said, "God, I want to die. I'd rather be dead than to see these Assyrians get blessed by You, be forgiven by You and for You to be kind to them. I'd rather die."

As crazy as that sounds, there are some people who have taken such a posture, and I'm talking about Christian people. They are so angry to the point that they literally have allowed hatred in their heart towards someone who has wronged them or someone who is, maybe, on the political spectrum at the other end than they are, who are pushing to do things politically that are maybe hurting the country and not favoring the Church. They would rather see those people die and go to hell than to repent and to see God show kindness and mercy to them.

Friend, if that has been you, if you sort of rejoice when the wicked fall or when something bad happens to an enemy as opposed to praying for their repentance and for their restoration, you maybe need to look at your own heart. Spend some time before God and get that sorted out because it will be an open door for the devil to come into your life. The Bible says, "Give no place to the devil," and, in the connection with that, it says, "Don't let the sun go down upon your wrath or your anger."

Anger, when it's not dealt with, leaves an open door to the devil. If you are so angry with someone, like Jonah was, that you don't think it's right, you think it's bad, you think it's evil if God is merciful to them, I'm just telling you, you have left the window open. You have left the front door open, and the devil can just walk right in. You need to close that door. You need to close that window and get your heart right before God. Let God be merciful to the ones He will be merciful to. You just need to take care of tidying up your own living room, friend, and not wishing that somebody else is going to get theirs because of perhaps the bad things they've done.

It's interesting again in verse 2 that Jonah said this. "When I was still in my own land before I fled to Tarshish this is what I said: 'I know You're gracious. I know You're a merciful God. I know You're slow to anger. I know You're abundant in lovingkindness, and You relent. You don't want to have bad things happen to people. You want to see people repent so You can display Your mercy, Your lovingkindness, and Your grace.'"

Jonah said, "I knew that. I knew You were going to forgive them, and I didn't want that to happen. I wanted them to be destroyed once that forty-day window had elapsed." I think it's something that we need to really consider. Jonah knew that if they repented, God would show mercy to them and deliver them. But some of God's own children are not so sure God will have mercy on them. There are people who are forever eaten up with the thought that, "God is mad at me, and He's not going to show mercy to me, and He's not going to deliver me."

No, friend, if God would deliver the evil Assyrians when they truly repented from their heart, will God not take care of His own child? Will God not show mercy to you and compassion to you? You need to know that God is merciful, that He's gracious, that He's slow to anger, and He is great in kindness. Not just for somebody else, but for you. He wants to have mercy on you, my

brother. He wants to show kindness to you, my sister. If God showed mercy on Nineveh, He will have mercy on you. No sin is too great.

The Ninevites, as I shared a few minutes ago, were extremely wicked. The devil will whisper in your ear, “God will never forgive you. God is holding that against you.” Listen, that is a lie. If you repent and ask God to forgive you, He will forgive you. And He not only forgives, He forgives and forgets. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us, and He throws our sins,” the Scripture says, “in the sea of forgetfulness.” It will never be remembered against you again.

I love King David’s words in the book of Psalms. “Lord, if You counted iniquity, if You counted up our sins against us, who would stand?” The answer is no one, but He is great in mercy. He’s great in kindness. In fact, He displayed that ultimately by sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. You may be watching me right now, and it’s not by coincidence. It’s not by chance. God knows your name, and He loves you; and you may have had a very sordid past, and you’ve done things that you’re so ashamed of. Listen, you’re not too far gone. God loves you. If you repent and turn to Him with all of your heart and your soul, God will have mercy on you. He is kind.

Now, Jonah said, “God, just kill me.” Maybe it was just because Jonah so hated the Ninevites. Maybe he was being a bit of a coward. Now that they repented, Jonah said, “In forty days, God’s going to destroy you. Now that’s not going to happen. Maybe they’re going to say that I’m a false prophet.” I think more than anything, it’s just because his own will was frustrated in the matter, and things didn’t work out the way that Jonah wanted them to. Listen to this in verse 4 NKJV. I want to read it to you. Jonah is so angry. He wants to die.

> 4 Then the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

God’s trying to help Jonah. It goes on and says, "So Jonah went out of the city.” Now, this is how Jonah responds to God’s question. Verse 5 NKJV,

> 5 So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter. . .

Or other translations say a booth, made it with different branches or whatever was available there.

> 5 . . . made himself a shelter, sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city.

The way Jonah answered God is he didn’t answer Him at all. He’s kind of hoping things will change. He goes to this sort of a perch where he can overlook the city, makes this little booth or shelter, and sits there just to see what will happen, because apparently the forty-day window has expired, and he’s just hoping maybe something changed, and maybe God will still destroy them.

Jonah just basically ignores God’s question. But here’s the thing, friend. God doesn’t go away, and the issues He’s asking us to deal with will not go away either. There might be something that God has been dealing with you about, and you just may need to deal with it; and you need to have that talk with God and get things straightened out. The next thing that happens is actually quite interesting. In verse 6 it says,

> [6] And the Lord God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

Now, it's interesting, the word *plan*t there, and some translations actually put it this way, it's the Hebrew word for a "castor-oil plant." It has broad leaves, and castor oil is one of the most medicinal plants in the world. They make oil from the seeds, and it works on everything from arthritis to—some people say it'll help your hair grow back. But I was actually looking the other day. There's the longest list of medicinal purposes; it is one of God's gifts, naturally speaking, to the world—Castor oil. Plus it has these big, broad leaves. It came up, and so it's adding more shade for Jonah.

However, if you know anything about castor oil, it tastes nasty! It is horrible tasting! Here where I live in this country, there have been ongoing jokes about the taste of castor oil since I was a kid. God is about to do something medicinal for Jonah. He is about to give Jonah some Holy Spirit castor oil. But sometimes God's dealings with us are not so easy to take. It's like, "God, no. I don't want that." God is saying, "No, take a spoonful. It's good for you. This will help you." God is trying to help Jonah. It goes on in verses 7–9 NKJV,

> [7] But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. [8] And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." [9] Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"

Jonah is in such a state right now. He's angry about the plant, and he wants to die over the plant, as silly as that is. But God is trying to teach Jonah something. God is really trying to help him, and this ought to tell us a few things. One, a person can be used by God without being a hundred percent right.

Jonah, from the beginning, his attitude has been wrong. His heart has been wrong, yet God still used him to deliver His message to the Assyrians. Think about that if you would. Now, Samson, used by God mightily, carried off the city gates on his back. He killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey, and he did all these supernatural feats. The Holy Spirit was anointing him, yet while much of that was happening, Samson was involved with prostitutes, and he got involved with Delilah.

He had some serious moral flaws, and if you look at the life of Samson, he was always, as we say, "pushing the envelope." He was always staying out in the gray areas. He was a Nazarite. He had this vow which, one thing, he didn't cut his hair; another thing, he's never to come near a dead body. Yet he does come to an animal's dead body, and he takes honey because the bees had made a honeycomb inside of the animal's dead body.

Samson could sort of argue, "Well, the law is not specific. It just infers that it's a dead human body I'm not supposed to come near. But I think I can get away with this. I can come near an animal's dead body." The other part of the Nazarite vow is that he's not supposed to have anything to do with grapes. He can't eat the skin of a grape, he can't eat the leaves of a grape, he can't drink grape juice, he can't drink wine, he can't eat grapes, and yet we find he's out in the vineyards.

He didn't tell his folks about it. That's where the whole thing happened—I think it was a bear that he killed or a lion that he killed, and "our adversary walks about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour." My friend, when you play in the gray areas, that's where you're going to be attacked by the devil. So, Samson is out there in the gray areas, and he's messing around with sin, and yet God is still anointing him.

Now the thing is, God gives grace, and if those people who are messing around like that, if they eventually don't get things straightened out, if they don't repent and get their hearts right, they will end up on the spiritual junk heap. But you need to realize that just because someone is used by God, doesn't mean that their doctrine is pure or that their motives or their attitudes are right. So don't go and adopt someone's attitude towards something just because they are being used by God and think that "Well, their attitude has to be right because God is using them," or just because someone gets results that doesn't mean that everything's right with God.

God gives people a space to repent. We need to stick with the Word of God and let our attitudes and our judgments be formed from that. I think that's worth really thinking about. Because there are some people who have gone off the tracks, it is this season where God is being merciful. He's working with them like He did with Jonah, trying to get them to repent, trying to get them to think straight, but there still might be miracles happening in their ministry. There might be results.

Maybe people are coming to Christ, but that doesn't mean everything they do and everything they say is right. We always have to come back to the Word of God and let that set the guardrails for our life. Let that be the final authority on our thinking, our opinions, and our attitudes. That's just a little side thing; I thought it might be worthwhile for you, but if you think about it, here God prepared a worm, but before that, He prepared a plant.

God prepares a plant, He prepares a worm, and then He prepares an east wind. In Jonah 1:17, God prepared a great fish. So, God prepares a fish, God prepares a plant, God prepares a worm, and God prepares an east wind. He is not limited to our knowledge of our circumstances, and you may see no way out of the situation that you are in right now. My friend, God has unlimited resources. If He wants to, He can use a worm to bring deliverance to you.

If God wants to, He can use a bird. You look through the Scriptures, God used bears, God used birds, God used lions, God used a donkey to speak, God used fish, and God even used a worm. He can bring deliverance to you through a way that you could never even figure out. If God can use all these things. If He can use bears, if He can use worms, if He can use fish, if He can speak through a donkey—God can use you!

Listen, you have more going for you than a stubborn donkey does. You have more going for you than a bear, a worm, or a fish does. If God can use them, He can use you. Again, in all of this, God is trying to help Jonah. We read on. God says, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" Jonah says, "Yeah, it's right, even to death." He still wants to die. Verses 10–11 NKJV,

> [10] But the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. [11] And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?"

The lessons continue. Jonah is more concerned with a plant, and he has more compassion for a plant than he does for people. The plant came up in a night, and it perished in a night. Plants do not have a soul. They will not spend eternity somewhere. They won't last forever. But men and women are eternal beings, and they will spend eternity somewhere. Every one of you listening to me right now will spend eternity somewhere.

You are an eternal being, my friend. Long after the seas have dried up and the mountains have crumbled, long after the stars have ceased to make their stately march through the heavens, you will be somewhere, alive, thinking, conscious. You'll either be in the presence of God or you'll be burning in the lake of fire—is what the Scriptures tell us. Every human being, it is the same.

Now, here's the truth. Some people would be more upset because they failed to water their plants for a couple of weeks, and the plants died—their houseplants died. They'd feel really bad about that. They'd feel worse about that than the fact that they have never shared Christ with their next-door neighbor, and the next-door neighbor died, and they don't know if they're in heaven or if they're in hell.

Some people feel worse about a plant that died than about their neighbor who has an eternal soul. Some people care more about their dogs and their cats than they do about people. Listen, God is interested in animals. We know that, even from what God said to Jonah here. There are 120,000 people who don't know their right hand from their left hand, and much livestock. The book of Proverbs says, "A righteous man cares for the life of his animal." So yes, God cares for animals, but not to the degree and not in the way He cares for people.

We need to be more concerned for people than we are for animals. God said, "Listen Jonah, you didn't make the plant grow. You didn't work to create it, and yet you had pity on the plant. Shouldn't I pity these people in Nineveh who are made in My image? They're the work of My hands. I've given the breath of life to them. Shouldn't I pity them? They don't know their right hand from their left hand."

In other words, they're ignorant of spiritual things. Now, they knew enough to repent, and they knew enough to fast and to cry out to God, but they were basically ignorant of much of God and much of His laws. God said, "Shouldn't I be merciful to them?" Now, we don't know if Jonah ever got his attitude straightened out, but I think we can learn from this.

We don't want to sit in our little religious shelter, our little religious booth, while we judge others. We should be interceding before God on their behalf, that God would show mercy to the lost. We need to warn them, like Jonah did, that there are consequences for their sin, but then we need to show them that there is a way out, and His name is Jesus Christ. He paid the ultimate price to redeem humanity, to redeem you. My time's gone. I have more to say, but that'll just have to wait till another day. I love you, but more important than that, God loves you. We'll see you next time.

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