message TRANSCRIPT

Answers with BAYLESS CONLEY

Jonah: When Mercy Offends

by Bayless Conley

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Hello friend. I am so glad that you have joined me. We are studying one of the most intriguing and powerful stories in the whole Bible. It is one from the Old Testament that Jesus actually referred to and authenticated that it did happen. If you have been with us over the last couple of programs, broadcasts, or through whatever means you are receiving this right now, we have been talking about Jonah. Jesus said, “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so must the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

It was a type and shadow of Christ’s death and burial, and then coming up from the dead, us preaching to the world, and God having mercy on them. For in the story of Jonah, he was three days and three nights in the belly of that great fish. Once the fish spit him out, he went and preached to Nineveh. They repented, and God had mercy on them. It was powerful in the time it happened, but it was also prophetic, pointing to the future regarding what Christ would do for us and for the whole world.

Now, in this story, God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and to cry out against it, to preach repentance to them, because their wickedness was great and had come up before God. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. The Assyrians may have been the most savage people who have ever lived on the face of the earth. We talked about some of these things previously, so I am not going to belabor the point, but I will mention this. They were the sworn enemies of Israel.

They were so wicked and so brutal. When they would conquer a city, they weren’t like the Romans who would establish a garrison there to keep order and to keep everything under Roman rule. What the Assyrians would do is slaughter everyone, or they would take all the men, skin them alive and hang their skins on the walls of the city. They would impale thousands of men on poles and leave them to hang with a pole under their ribcage, just dangling there all around the city. So everyone was afraid to rebel against them, that is, anyone who was left alive.

Jonah, knowing perhaps, being a prophet, and knowing that one day Israel is going to be carried away into Assyrian captivity, is thinking, “I am not preaching to these guys.” In fact, at the end of the book, Jonah has a conversation with God, and he says, “God, I knew You were merciful, and that is why I did not want to go in the first place.” Jonah did not want to go preach to them because he thought there was a chance they might repent, and if they did, God would be merciful to them and forgive them. Jonah did not want that to happen.

Interesting, it kind of reminds me of some people whom I know. They are just so dead set against other people whom they feel have hurt them. They just want to see them go to hell. They want to see them burn. They do not want to see God have mercy on them. My friend, that is not the right posture to take. So anyway, Jonah runs from the presence of the Lord, and he gets on a ship headed to Tarshish, modern-day Spain, about as far away as you could get from that Assyrian capital of Nineveh—as you could in the then-known world.

Of course, we know the story. God sends a great storm onto the sea, and all the sailors realize this is bad. It is getting worse and worse. In fact, it is in a progressive tense in the Hebrew language. It is growing more and more tempestuous, and they cast lots to figure out who this is, and what is the cause of this? “Who has done something to offend the gods?” Finally, Jonah fesses up, saying, “I serve the Lord God, the Creator of heaven and earth. I am running from His presence, and that is why this has happened.”

The guys absolutely freak out. “Okay, you serve the God who made the sea, that we are bobbing around in like a cork in this storm, and you are disobeying Him?” Anyway, they reluctantly throw Jonah into the sea because Jonah said, “If you do that, the storm will cease.” It is raging. They do not want to do it. In fact, let me read to you Jonah 1:10–12 NKJV. It says,

> 10 Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?” For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. 11 Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?”—for the sea was growing more tempestuous.12 And he said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.”

Well, Jonah, it was because of you in one sense, but it was because of the thousands upon thousands of people in Nineveh that God sent the storm. God wants to be merciful. God wants to show mercy. If He cannot get somebody to go and preach repentance to people, they will not have the chance to turn their hearts to God. God sent the storm because of Jonah, but God sent the storm because He is merciful, and He was interested in the lives of all of these men and women, even though their wickedness was great.

Friend, I just want to tell you something. You may think, “No, I have sinned too much. God can never forgive me.” Listen, He loves you, and He wants to have mercy on you. There is room for you at the table. If you will repent of your sin, if you will turn to Jesus Christ, put your trust in the risen Lord to save you, He will have mercy on you. Doesn’t matter what you failed to do that you should have done, or what you did not do, or what you did that you never should have done. God is full of compassion. He is full of mercy and grace, and He is disposed to show favors.

My friend, He will come to you if you will turn your heart to Him. The Scriptures say, “Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners.” I know I am talking to somebody right now. You are not too far gone. So anyway, Jonah says, “You have to throw me in if the storm is going to stop.” Jonah 1:13–14 NKJV,

> 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. 14 Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, “We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You.”

In other words, “God, it was not our idea to throw him in. It was his idea. So please do not be mad at us for doing this.” Verse 15–16 NKJV,

> 15 So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.

I want to comment on that. A lot of people, when they get in trouble, make promises and vows to God. “I am going to start going to church. God, I am going to give You my life if You just save me, if You will just get me out of this. Oh God, oh God, please, I will do this. Help me.” The situation passes, the danger is averted, and the gracious hand of God brings deliverance. But I think very few people keep those vows, the vows they made in times of distress.

My friend, if you have made vows to God when you were in trouble, it is time for you to start keeping them. I know some of you may be listening to me, you were in trouble, maybe in trouble with the law, in trouble because of your own stupidity, or maybe some other situation, and in your heart, you made a promise to God, but you have yet to keep it. My friend, God remembers that promise, and it is not too late for you to fulfill it. Do what you said. Give your life to God. Start going to church or whatever kind of promise that you made to Him. Now they throw Jonah in. Verse 17 NKJV says,

> 17 Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

So they throw him in. Think about this, Jonah did not know that God had prepared a great fish to swallow him. Jonah did not know that. Jonah thought he was going to die. Even if the storm would stop, Jonah is too far from land to get there. He would rather die than go preach to the Assyrians. He said, “I would rather die, just throw me in.” He fully expected to die. It was the mercy of God that He had prepared that great fish. The word “prepared” carries with it the idea of creation. Perhaps God created this great fish just for this purpose, or maybe He directed some fish that existed.

In the New Testament, when Jesus referred to this story, Jonah was in the belly of the great fish. Some older translations say it was in the belly of the whale. Well, whether it was a whale or a great fish, they are actually in the Hebrew and in the Greek language just generic terms for a great sea creature. But God prepared it out of mercy. It saved Jonah’s life. I am just going to refer back to what I did a few moments ago. I know there are some people who have been hurt very deeply by someone. For whatever reason, they just literally hate somebody. They would rather keep on hating that person than forgive them.

When we hate, when we allow bitterness into our life, when we allow unforgiveness to fester in our heart, it manifests in other ways. If you have bitterness in your heart, it is going to come out, and it is going to affect your marriage. It is going to affect your relationship with your children. It is going to affect your own mental health. It opens the door to depression and to darkness. It can erupt in physical sickness. Unforgiveness is a terrible thing. It opens the door to the enemy.

In fact, Jesus, in Mark 11, when He talked about prayer, “What things soever you desire, when you pray, believe you receive them, and you shall have them.” In the same breath, He said, “And when you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone.” I think unforgiveness is the number one thing that keeps our prayers from being answered. But there are some people who are clinging so tight to that animosity that they feel, to that anger that they feel, they would rather go to an early grave than forgive. They would rather put up with the destruction in their own family and the depression that they are grappling with than to release someone and just let things go.

My friend, you will find out that when you forgive, you set a prisoner free, and that prisoner is you. Forgiveness, more than anything else, is for your benefit. When I forgive, it is for my benefit. Here, Jonah is basically saying, “I would rather die than go preach to these people. I

want them to be destroyed." Jonah is in the belly of the fish for three days and for three nights. It was not comfortable in there.

Later on, Jonah describes it like being in hell. That may have been the very thing that gave him the compassion, at least the degree of compassion, because Jonah struggled with some things all the way to the end of the story, but that made him decide to be obedient. He said, "I was in the belly of hell." Maybe he just got to thinking, "If I do not go preach to these people, they are going to be in hell eternally." We do not want that to happen to anyone. It said that Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then we come to Jonah 2:1 NKJV. It says,

> [1] Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly.

I do not know if you caught what we just read. The fish swallows Jonah. He is in this thing. He talks about the situation like being in hell. He is there three days and three nights, and then he prays. Friend, I would have shifted into speaking in other tongues when I was going over the side. Before I ever hit the water, I would have been praying.

But Jonah gets thrown in, a fish swallows him, and he is so stubborn and so set against the possible deliverance of these wicked Assyrians that he holds out for three days and three nights and refuses to say a word to God. It is not until three days and three nights in this fish that he finally prays. I hope you are not so stubborn. Verse 2 NKJV says,

> [2] And he said: "I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me.
> "Out of the belly of Sheol (out of the belly of hell) I cried, and You heard my voice."

Interesting. "I cried out to the Lord because of my *affliction*." That word comes from a verb meaning "to bind, to tie up, to restrict, to cramp." Jonah was not comfortable inside the belly of this great fish. Again, he likened it to being in hell. And then the next two things that Jonah says are very interesting. In verse 3–4 NKJV, this is part of his prayer, he says,

> [3] "For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; all Your billows and Your waves passed over me. [4] Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.'"

This is part of Jonah's prayer, and they are actually direct quotes from Psalm 88:6–8, and Psalm 31:22. Jonah knew the Word of God. Friend, when you pray, you need to let your prayer be filled with God's Word. Here, Jonah is in the belly of the fish, and the Word of God is coming out of him. Then the last part of his prayer that we read there in Jonah 2:4 NKJV, he said, "Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple." That is incredibly significant. Incredibly significant.

Now, the holy temple refers to Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, where the presence of God dwelt. It was a symbol for the presence of God. The ark of the covenant was there. It had the mercy seat, the two golden cherubim's, and the glory of God—the Shekinah glory, the presence of God rested there above the mercy seat. The temple was for every Jew. It was the symbol of God's presence. Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the Lord; we are told in the text.

Now, when Solomon had finished the temple for the Lord, once he finished building it, and you can read this in 1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 6, the glory cloud of God filled the temple. And Solomon prayed a prayer in the presence of the entire congregation of Israel. You can read it in those references I gave, and I would encourage you to do it. They all knew, every Jew knew,

the content of the prayer. They taught it to their children as a revelation from Jehovah God, which it was indeed.

Jonah, when he said, “I will look again towards Your holy temple,” he was referring to what Solomon had stated so many years before, referring to this revelation from God that fell from the lips of Solomon. In that prayer, Solomon basically said, “If any man of the nation of Israel sins and brings trouble on himself,” exactly what Jonah has done. “If he will then pray toward the holy temple and God, if he will turn his heart back to You, Lord, You will forgive his sin and deliver him.”

Read the prayer. It is exactly what Solomon, inspired by the Spirit of God, said. If somebody has sinned and brought trouble on themselves, if they will look again towards Your holy temple and turn their heart towards Your presence and pray and repent, God, You will hear from heaven and You will bring deliverance. He went on, and said, “If there is pestilence, if there is drought, sickness, if the armies of Israel are defeated by another nation, if Israel will look again toward God’s holy temple, toward the presence of God, and get their hearts right, that God would forgive and then turn the situation around.”

In that prayer, again, inspired by the Spirit of God, Solomon went so far as to say, “Even if we go into captivity to our enemies, if in that foreign land we will look again towards Your holy temple, get our hearts right, seek Your presence, that You will intervene and have mercy on us there, even as we are in captivity in another nation.”

Now, at this point, when Jonah makes that statement, he is getting his heart right. At least as far as being obedient to God. It took him a while before he got around to praying, but thank God he is finally doing it. I am going to say what I said a little earlier. It is not too late for you, my friend. You may feel like you are too far gone. You are not too far gone. God has His eye on you, and He sees you even now. Let us read the next things that Jonah said in verse 5. He said,

> 5 “The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head.”

He is cramped. He is restricted. It was just miraculous that God kept him alive in there. But he is not sitting in a rocking chair with a cup of tea in his hand. He is in absolute agony. He said, “From the belly of hell, I cried,” literally from the region of the damned. He has even got seaweed wrapped around his head. Verse 6 NKJV,

> 6 “I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God.”

He said in verse 7 NKJV,

> 7 “When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple.”

Jonah, how do you know that your prayer went up to God? How do you know that God heard your prayer? Because the Word said that He would. In that inspired prayer of Solomon, the Scripture that fell from the lips of Solomon, that regardless of the trouble we have gotten ourselves in, if we will turn to Your presence and get our heart right and pray, then God, You will hear from heaven and You will bring deliverance. The promise is that God would hear.

Jonah knew God heard him by faith. Seaweed wrapped around his head. I do not know how God kept him alive, but he is restricted. He is in hell, as far as he is concerned. He knew that God heard his prayer when he got his heart right, and turned his heart toward God's presence, and decided to be obedient to God. Verses 8–10 NKJV, and this just gets better and better. Jonah now says something that we are going to spend a while talking about. He said,

> 8 "Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own mercy. 9 But I will sacrifice to
> You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the
> Lord." 10 So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Interesting. He said, "Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own mercy." What an interesting thing to say in his prayer. It is almost sort of parenthetical. "Those who regard," it means "to observe, to watch, to give your attention" to worthless idols. The word worthless means "empty." It literally means something that is a lie. Words, a statement, something that is empty. There is no truth in it. There is no power behind it. It is worthless and empty. Those who regard, who give their attention to, and listen to worthless idols.

I like the old King James Version, and I realize this is going out in numerous languages right now, but one of our old translations here in the English-speaking world is the King James Version, and it actually renders it this way, "Those who observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy." Now, here—and this is a good translation. "Those who observe or listen to or regard, give their attention to lying, worthless, empty idols."

Now, an idol was what the heathens worshiped, and it was a lie. Sometimes Israel was tempted to set up idols and to worship those idols, but they were a lie. They were empty. They promised things that they could not deliver. The idol said, "Listen, if you pray to me, I will give you rain, and you will have good crops." A lie. The idol has no power, but the idol is a lie set up by the enemy. "If your wife is barren, if you will pray to me, and if you will give a sacrifice, I will cause your wife to become fertile, and she will be able to bear children." It is a lie.

The idol set up by the enemy says, "Listen, if you will sacrifice to me, sacrifice your sons and daughters in the fire, I will protect your city walls. I will protect your army, and I will give you victory." A lie. It is empty. There is no truth in it, a lying vanity, a worthless idol. We could say it this way, and it captures the thought of what Jonah was saying, "Those who give heed to lies of the enemy forsake their own mercy."

In other words, the mercy that God is trying to extend to them, to bring deliverance, to bring help to them, they forsake that if they listen to the lie that the enemy has set up. If they listen to what the enemy, the adversary of their soul, is saying, the lies that the devil brings forth, then they will cut themselves off from the mercy that God wants to bring.

Think of it this way. Let me give you an example. You have somebody who is not a Christian. They are not saved. Well, the enemy tells them there is no God. That is a lying vanity, that is a lie of the enemy. The Scripture says in the book of Psalms, "The fool has said in his heart there is no God."

I have talked to people who do not believe in God and this thought addressed their mind. They heard somebody say it. They read something that some philosopher had to say, and they have come to this conclusion that there is no God. They have given heed to a lie of the enemy and the mercy of salvation that God is wanting to bring them. They forsake it. Or say somebody believes, "Well, you have to work your way into heaven."

Here is how the thing is set up, that if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds—imagine there is this big scale, and your good deeds weigh more than your bad deeds. Well, you will get into heaven. That is a lie of the enemy. “Salvation is by grace through faith and not of works, lest any man should boast.” But if I give heed to that, I am going to forsake the mercy of salvation that God is trying to bring to me. Or as I have mentioned several times already, some people have bought this lie of the enemy. They have given heed to it. “You have been too bad; you have gone too far. You have stepped over the line too many times. God does not love you. There is no mercy for you.”

No, my friend, the truth is Christ died for you. He nailed your sins to the cross. If you put your trust in Him, you can be saved. “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, for He is rich in mercy to all who call upon Him.” But some have bought into that lie. They have given heed to that lie, “I have waited too long. I have gone too far. I have sinned too much. God does not love me. Salvation is not for me.” No, that is a lie of the enemy. It is a worthless idol. It is a lying vanity. Do not give heed to it, my friend.

Give heed to God’s Word, which is the truth. We could go on and on about this. In fact, I would like to. I have a lot to say, but I do not have a lot of time. So, listen, I thank you for joining me. I want you to deeply consider the things that we have been talking about. I am going to pick this up in the next message that I bring here from the book of Jonah.

I just want to close with this. I want to tell you, God loves you. He loves you more than you have the capacity to understand it. He is rich in mercy to all who call upon Him. He loves you. He wants to help you. It is not a coincidence that you are watching me right now. Turn your heart to His presence. Say, “God, help me.” Turn to Him, and you will find out He will be there for you. God bless you. See you next time.

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