

Jonah's Judgment: He'd Rather be Right
Than See God's Mercy on Those He Despises¹

January 21, 2018

I

Well. The story of Jonah! I have to confess that the first time I read this short little story all the way through was when I was in seminary. And I remember reading it at the dining room table, and laughing out loud at its funny lines.

Now you didn't hear those funny lines this morning – no, you just heard the beginning and end, more or less, of the story. But let me back up a bit and do this tale a bit more justice. 'Cause I think right at the heart of it, there's an essential truth.

See, what you didn't hear this morning was God saying to Jonah, "Should I not be concerned about Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left ... and also many animals?"

And of course, if we could have just heard Jonah's reply, I'll bet he would have said, "No, you should not be concerned with that scum ... or their cats or their dogs or anything about them! They not only don't know their right hand from their left, but they're immoral, Godless people, and I want you to wipe 'em out like you said you were going to do. I warned them you were going to do it, and now I want you to do it!"

Now Jonah is not having a great day here. In fact, Jonah hasn't had a good week. So let's back way up to the story's start.

See, here's Jonah at home, minding his own business, when God commands him to go to Ninevah and preach repentance. But instead, Jonah hops on the next boat going in the opposite direction. And then a fierce storm blows up, and all on board are nearly killed, 'til Jonah fesses up about how he's running away from God. So then to save their skins, the sailors toss him overboard.

But then God sends a whale to gobble him up, and after spending ... oh, I don't know ... maybe about three days in its belly, he gets coughed up onto dry land. And then once again God commands Jonah to go to Ninevah.

Well, this time, he goes. But can't you just see him ... picture him shuffling, dragging his feet, scuffing long footmarks in the sand, as he heads off for that great city.

See, Jonah definitely does not want to go to Ninevah ... 'cause he sees it as part of an evil empire, capital of a country now known as Iraq ... an empire as hostile to the Jews then as it is today. And so Jonah doesn't want any part of this mission. No way!

First off, he doesn't want to be a prophet, 'cause he knows what generally happens to prophets. And second, he doesn't want to save Ninevah in the first place. No ... as far as he's concerned, if that evil empire wants to go to hell, then let it!

But now see, it looks like God has a different idea. So after being spit out on dry land and after being told by God again that he's going to go to Ninevah, he goes. Not because Jonah has changed his mind about that place, but because he knows he has no choice. And besides ... actually on further thought, since it is such an evil place, Jonah thinks he's going to get the satisfaction of witnessing its destruction. So O.K., he'll go. And O.K., he'll deliver the message. Repent ... or go to hell. Repent ... or be destroyed. And then ... he'll gladly sit back and watch it all happen!

But as it turns out, Jonah's still not going to have a great day. 'Cause when he delivers his eight-word prophecy to that evil city filled with its evil people who do not know their right hand from their left ... when he shouts into the air the words, "Yet forty days, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" ... just when he glares and squints at these dogs of people massed before him ... just then, to his shock, the people all repent on that very spot.

Yes, the king of Ninevah orders a fast, they all put on sackcloth and ashes, and they repent! 'Cause the king cries, "Who knows, God may relent and change his mind; God may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

And then you know what happens? Sure enough, God does change his mind. He looks and sees the sackcloth and the ashes and hears the peoples' cry ... and then I guess God himself repents of what he was about to do ... God relents, he turns and changes, and the people of Ninevah ... that formerly evil empire ... they live.

Well you'd think that would be a happy ending, right? You'd think everyone would be delighted. You'd think that even Jonah, caught at first by surprise, would be amazed and then delighted at the power of his prophetic words ... just think, to turn a whole people around!

But is he delighted? No! Jonah is not delighted. Jonah is angry. Jonah is very, very angry. He's so angry he could die.

II

See, the last thing in the world that Jonah wants is for the Ninevites to repent so God will wind up sparing them. No, what he really wants is for them to be annihilated. He wants them to vaporize because ... he hates them. He hates them for what they've done to his people. He hates their godless ways. And so he wants them destroyed. But maybe ... maybe more importantly ... Jonah just wants to be right. Right all along about those people – you know, that “I told you so” right.

But now look what happens. Jonah screws up all his courage, goes into enemy territory, tells ‘em they’re going to get theirs, and then ... he loses face ... ‘cause God goes and changes God’s mind!

Now isn't it interesting that everyone in this story repents ... everyone repents ... the people of Ninevah, their king, probably their cats and dogs ... even God repents by changing God's mind ... everyone repents ... but Jonah. No, Jonah sulks and then he shuffles out to the outskirts of town, hoping against hope that God'll change God's mind again. 'Cause if God doesn't destroy these people, then something's just screwy here. Then maybe God's idea of justice must be very different than Jonah's. And Jonah just can't deal with that!

So here's my question. Can you ... and I ... deal with that?

See, I think there seems to be something in human nature that does demand justice, that demands a sense of fair play ... even from God. 'Cause I think there just might be, embedded in your and my brains – might be a sense of bargaining, a sense of negotiation, of fair play in our dealings even with God. For example, they've found inscribed on an ancient Roman shrine to some god or another the words, “I give ... in order that you may give.” And the whole story of Job and his troubles begins with this question: “Will someone serve God for nothing?”

I mean, it seems that deeply embedded in there somewhere, we expect a fair return on our investment. A fair return for me! So like, you know, when someone else gets something – some lucky break – that I don't think they deserved ... no, I deserved it ... and ... and it just isn't fair!

And so it goes. Moans and whines and laments ring out all over our lives. And so like Jonah you sit under your own bush, pouting, watching ... watching enemies from afar ... maybe hoping to see what bad thing happens to them, hoping they'll get theirs for all the injustices and hardships they've caused you. And maybe it gnaws at your core and eats you up.

Now, if you've never felt like this before, then you probably aren't going to get the punch line to this morning's story. But for all of us who have felt like this before, who've felt like Jonah pouting on the outskirts of town ... 'cause we really want to be right! Let's stick with the story and see where it takes us.

III

See, here's Jonah, squatting in a little hut on a hill overlooking Ninevah, hoping for a hail storm or earthquake to pound the Ninevites into oblivion. And then along comes God who decides to grow a little bush up beside Jonah's perch, to shade Jonah's head. And Jonah likes that very very much ... relaxing ... cooling in its shade. I mean, after all, this shade's only his due, given all he's suffered.

But unfortunately, the next day God sends a worm to eat up the little bush right down to its roots! And it withers. So that the sun beats right down on old Jonah's head. So now Jonah's angry again, so angry he could spit, so angry he says he wants to die.

But then God asks him a trick question with a sort-of divine sense of humor: "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" Now as someone's pointed out, if Jonah says "no," then he's admitting that what happens to the bush, what happens to him, what happens to the Ninevites, to their animals, is none of his business, but God's. That somebody else is running the show, and the whats and whys are just none of his business.

But if he says "yes," it is right for him to be angry about what's happened to that bush, then God can compare the fate of the bush ... God's doing ... to the spared fate of a whole city, and Jonah's pettiness will be exposed.

So what does Jonah answer? You got it! He says, "Yes, I am angry about what happened to this bush! It was my bush, it was given to me, and then it died!"

Well finally, it seems to me that this Jonah story ... and the whole Gospel story, by the way ... are poking at all of us who expect mercy for ourselves, blessings for ourselves, but merciless justice for the rest of the world. See, we're such scorekeepers, aren't we! You keep score, you count up, you watch and the weigh ... but apparently in the end, God does not. And this, my friends, is called pure grace.

So here's my take-home point: Maybe those of us who are angry enough to die when our calculations go awry, maybe we see ourselves like Jonah here as righteous prophets, pointing fingers at those scummy Ninevites. But maybe from where God sits, all of us ... all of us who don't know our right hand from our left ... all of us look pretty much like a mess.

Oh, some of us clean up pretty good. But actually, when you get right down to it, most of us belong right down there in Ninevah with all the rest of the poor, sad fools with their cats and their dogs ... all those lost ones that God's apparently decided to save.

So God is not fair. Thank God! And God's ways are not your ways ... not my ways. Thank God! So I think if you want to start seeing things God's way, you just might question your own notions ... my notions ... of what's fair ... you might question why you get so upset when your calculations aren't met.

'Cause in the end, God is not fair. And I'll tell you something. I think that's great good news. 'Cause if God is not fair than there's a chance you'll get more than you deserve ... not because of who you are but because of who God is. God is not fair; God is generous.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ Resources Used: Synthesis for January 21, 2018; Barbara Brown Taylor's "Ninevites and Ne're Do Wells" in Gospel Medicine, 1995.