

GR11 Sermon 03 Mar 2022 Morning

Vic Lim Yi Jin

Jonah 4

In Jonah 4, we are given a glimpse of Jonah's true motive and intention. He finally exploded and gave the full explanation of why he didn't obey God throughout the journey. He listed all his emotions and deepest thoughts towards God. When you are employed you are forced to obey your boss as your boss pays your wages. But a person can be so done and can say I quit. At this point the boss has no power over this person. But what if the boss is no other than God. All the frustration and anger are directed towards the perfect God. This is what happened to Jonah. After the entire city of Nineveh repented of their sins, and God chose to forgive and not to destroy the City, Jonah was done with God. Jonah 1 says that Jonah thought what God did was a great evil to Jonah, that it was absolutely wrong for God to let Nineveh live. Jonah as a prophet God has direct access to God and knew God very well, but this prophet chose to not obey God and he prayed for that. The Israel back then were like Jonah, they hated the Assyrians, and Jonah disobedience was a heroic effort from Israelites eyes. But this Israeilite hero now turned to God in anger and hatred, their hero has become the villain. Everyone that cheered for the hero has to reconsider whether their hero is right.

In Jonah 3, Jonah preached to the Nineveh, but even after that, Jonah kept hoping till the end that the people of Nineveh would not repent and God would destroy them. But after 40 days, the disaster did not come, and Niniveh still stood. It is clear that God has chosen to forgive the people of Nineveh, and He accepted the prayer of the evil assyrians. Jonah could not understand that God would overlook their sins and let them live. But is it really true that Jonah could not understand God's action? No, as the reality is that Jonah knew exactly why God can do this. Jonah just could not face it. Jonah prayed in Jonah 4:2 "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster". Jonah knows who God is, and so Jonah knows what God will do also.

But Jonah did not understand what God did according to God's own merciful nature. How could the God of Israelites show mercy to the enemy nation? If God just let them live today, they may destroy Israelites tomorrow. How could God be on the side of the enemy, be merciful in the times of war? Jonah could no longer remain silent, he was not afraid of God anymore, he was not even afraid of death anymore. Jonah said Jonah 4:3 "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." God has saved him from the seas by sending a big fish to swallow him up. But now, Jonah asks God who saved him to let him die. Because Jonah wanted God to show no mercy to the people of Nineveh. Jonah asked God to kill him too so that God remained consistent. If God's mercy means the salvation of Nineveh, he would rather God uphold His justice to be merciless altogether. But asking for death, Jonah wanted to drag the people of Nineveh to hell by his own hands.

There is another reason why Jonah wanted his own death, it is precisely because he knows that God is merciful. What can God do now? Kill me? I should have died in the seas. It is God's idea not mine. God can kill me but I don't care anymore. He was threatening God with his own well being, this can only work when he knows that God loves him more than JOnah loves himself. He is using God's merciful nature against God Himself. As if Jonah said "So God you want to be merciful to sinners, what if I provoke You to kill me, will You now throw away your mercy to fulfill your anger toward me?" Jonah is not someone who we can look up to. Jonah was a disobedient prophet, he ran away from God, because he couldn't stand seeing Nineveh be saved by the merciful God he knows. Jonah's greatest sin was not hating the people of Nineveh as they were, instead he was hating God for He is. Jonah didn't want God to be God, instead he wanted God to be him, Jonah wanted to be god. Like Jonah, we often want to play as god too. We want God to do His power according to our interests. When God doesn't give us what we want, we get angry with God. When troubles come to us such as sickness and death, war or natural disaster, we get angry with God.

To let God be God, it is worth looking at the book of Job. Job 2:7-10 "So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips."

Imagine yourself in Job's position, the evil that happens in life can be very confusing. The book of Job challenges us that God is a merciful God, even when He allows certain things to happen in your life. How will you deal with it, if what God sees good to Him seems evil to you. Will you defy God as Jonah did or will you submit as Job. If you feel you are more like Jonah, please give attention for the next session. After Jonah protested against God, God gave answers to Jonah. Perhaps God's answer is the answer you need. But before that, let us have a look into more details of Jonah's disagreement with God's mercy. Is it good and true, that God should save people that you disapprove of?

The story of Jonah is perfect for the unbelievers. Often non-Christians say this, "Why would God save bad people and condemn good persons?" They are asking the same question as Jonah. Both they and Jonah have the same problem of who God has chosen to save. So the question is who should go to heaven and who should go to hell. People of this world have different opinions on this issue. Some say that nobody deserves hell, everyone deserves heaven. Some says that hell is for extremely terrible people, terrorist, rapists, and corrupt politicians. Some say that hell is for those who have done bad things more than good things. Who deserves to go to hell and who deserves to go to heaven?

There is another question which also has many opinions. Not only do human opinions clash with one another, but our opinions also clash with God's opinion. If there should be any right or

wrong in this world, who has to decide it? The story of Jonah gave the answer: God who created all things, and defines all things, He has the exclusive right to decide what is right or wrong. According to Him, it is right to extend His mercy to sinners like us. God's mercy is also for you. But it is not that God would save someone who says that he believes in God even though he continues to sin. Rather the Bible said that believing in God and receiving His mercy will definitely lead to radical transformation in a person's character. Those who are transformed by God, would decide to honour God and obey Him every day. When a woman who committed adultery was brought to Jesus, this is what Jesus said to her (John 9:11b): "Neither do I condemn you" but He didn't stop there, He continued "Go and sin no more".

If someone understands how great it is to be forgiven by God, our thankfulness will drive us to holiness. In fact look at how the people of Nineveh repented, they believe that God is holy and just, and they understood they had sinned against God, they repented before God. How can someone who claimed to truly believe in God, but refused to change? The story of Jonah extends an invitation to non-Christians, will you come to God, repent your sin, and put your trust in God's mercy?" He is able and willing to save you. The opinion of God will always trump the opinion of humans. Because God is God, so let God be God and let man be man. God does everything according to what He desires. But will it lead to chaos? No, because God desires everything according to who He is. God is good. The unrepentant Jonah still remained unrepentant. So it is now up to God to pronounce judgment to Jonah or to extend mercy to him. God chose mercy. In Jonah 4:5-11, God and Jonah have a conversation back and forth for the first time. This conversation is similar to a counseling session. On one side, Jonah hated the people of Nineveh too much, on the other side God wants Jonah to learn important lessons. It is the lesson on God's mercy. Jonah must understand that God can show mercy to whomever God wishes to show mercy. Previously Jonah was glad that God showed mercy to him, but he cannot allow God to show the same mercy to the people of Nineveh. God wants to reveal Jonah inconsistency to himself. But how can you teach a person who was blinded by hatred? God chose a wise way.

God showed Jonah a parable that is similar to the case of the people of Nineveh, but in this parable the people of Nineveh had been replaced by a plant. The story of a plant is very similar to King David's counseling session with God, instead David's session is much more intense. God sent prophet Nathan to David and the prophet told David a parable. In 2 Samuel 12:1-7 where the rich man took the only lamb that the poor had, to prepare for the guest who came to him. Upon hearing the story, David was very angry with the rich man, and said that the rich man deserved to die. But prophet Nathan said "You are the man". When the character of the story is replaced we can detach our emotions and think clearly. God often uses this technique especially when our thoughts have been blinded by our emotions. After Jonah complained against God, he went outside the city and waited. Maybe he was hoping that God would change His mind and destroy the city. The weather there was very hot, so Jonah made a booth for him. It was helping him but not enough to block the sunlight. So God caused a kind of plant that grew very quickly, and it climbed to the top of the booth, and grew huge leaves so it created shades over Jonah. Jonah was quite happy with the plant, even though he loved the plant. Jonah also knew very

well that the plant was a merciful gift from God, because it appeared at the right place, at the right time, and the speed of its growth was unnatural.

However God's true gift was not the shade that the plant can provide, rather God's lesson that teaches Jonah. The plant only gave Jonah one day of shade. The next day, God sent a worm to kill the plant, and the plant wilted immediately. Jonah immediately became angry at God, and complained again, and asked God to kill him. But God said to Jonah do you do well to be angry with the plant? Jonah was angry, and angry enough to die. For Jonah, the plant is important and valuable, he loved the plant but as it was dead, he was angry at God on behalf of the plant. But this is exactly what God felt to the people of Nineveh. God loved the people of Nineveh, they are important and valuable to God's eyes. God made every one of them, God prefers life over death even for the sinners of Nineveh. God said that the people of Nineveh couldn't tell between their left and right. It is not that they are morally innocent or they are backward in their thinking, rather it hinted they lacked a certain ability to choose the right thing. It is the lack of God's knowledge that leads to salvation. They know that they have sinned, but there is no way out for them. They are incompetent of repentance. As Deuteronomy 5:32 says, "You shall be careful therefore to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or the left". Also in Proverbs 4:27, "Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil."

Lets ask the last question, did Jonah repent? The book concludes with angry Jonah receiving a lesson and divine mercy and compassion from God Himself. Unfortunately we are not told how Jonah responded to this instruction. Instead we were left with the contrast between Jonah's hateful attitude and God's great mercy to the people of Nineveh. But most likely Jonah has repented because this story most probably written by Jonah himself or by someone who heard the story from Jonah. The fact that the story records Jonah disobedience so accurately, it is perhaps the sign of Jonah repentance after the story. The story of Jonah is the story of God's mercy to us. How does God extend this mercy to us? God sends Jesus to us to die for us. Those who come to Jesus, receive God's mercy.