

## **Jonah: The Prophet Who Ran From God**

### **Jonah 4:1-11**

#### **Introduction**

Jonah is one of the twelve Minor Prophets, but he is very unique. In the other prophecies, God's words to the prophets are mostly written in poetic expressions. The book of Jonah, however, depicts the drama of the prophet himself. Jonah is an unprecedented prophet who disobeyed God's command and ran away. His appearance is a mirror of your and my unbelieving attitude. From this we can see how God, who is full of mercy, loves us in our unbelief.

#### **Jonah 4:1-11**

<sup>4:1</sup> But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup> And he prayed to the Lord and said, "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. <sup>3</sup> Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." <sup>4</sup> And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

<sup>5</sup> Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. <sup>6</sup> Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. <sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." <sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." <sup>10</sup> And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

As we have just read, the prophet Jonah is displeased and angry. First, let's look at the cause of Jonah's anger. We too, like Jonah, get angry with God and turn away from Him. Second, let's look at how God dealt with Jonah's anger. I am amazed at God's patience, truthfulness, and compassion.

Third, let's look at God's deep mercy as we are being transformed. As we look at the process of Jonah's actions, we can find clues to a meaningful life with God. Jonah's anger, God's handling of it and God's mercy.

#### **Jonah the Prophet**

First, let's look briefly at the prophet Jonah. The name Jonah means "dove" in Hebrew. He was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the first half of the 8th century B.C. under King Jeroboam II. He is mentioned in the book of Kings as follows.

"He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher." (II Kings 14:25)

The "he" here refers to King Jeroboam, who ruled the kingdom for 41 long years (793-753 BC), waging war against surrounding nations and winning. He is said to have been at the height of economic prosperity, having regained as much territory as in the days of King Solomon. Jonah served under this king.

The name Jonah, meaning dove, gives a peaceful impression. However, Jonah was a prophet who advised King Jeroboam to restore the land and served for the prosperity of the Kingdom of Israel. Nevertheless, God commanded Jonah to go as a missionary to Nineveh, the great city of the Assyrian Empire, Israel's fearsome nemesis, and to speak the word of God. It was an unthinkable task for Jonah, a staunch patriot of Israel.

## 1. The cause of Jonah's anger

Jonah is in a bad mood because he is angry with God. Chapter 4:1 says that "this thing" made Jonah uncomfortable and angry, and chapter 3 says that Jonah went to Nineveh and told them the prophecy that "in forty days Nineveh will be destroyed". Then we are told that not only the king, but all the people of Nineveh believed God and repented. An amazing revival took place.

"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it." (Jonah 3:10)

The reason Jonah was angry was because God had forgiven and not judged Nineveh, even though he had declared that he would judge them. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh in the first place, and according to chapter 1, he did not obey God's command. Instead of going to Nineveh in the east, he fled to Tarshish in Spain in the far west to avoid the face of the Lord. He might have excused himself by saying that he was going on a mission to the western frontier, not to the east.

However, it is not that Jonah does not want to serve God. As a staunch devoted patriot, it was a joy for Jonah to serve his beloved Jews. However, he did not want to serve the enemy who was planning to invade and conquer his beloved homeland. This is the opposite of the gospel of loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you.

Moreover, Assyria was known as a wicked and brutal terrorist state. They would destroy every town they conquered and slaughter the inhabitants. It is natural to think that Assyria, with its beheadings, ripped off arms, and exposed corpses, is in violation of God's justice and truth. And it is obvious that if Assyria prospers and adds to its national strength, it will become a very serious threat to Israel.

"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, is this not 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. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.'" (Jonah 4:1-3)

Jonah first refused to go to Nineveh and then became angry that God had shown mercy to the wicked and cruel people of Nineveh. Very interestingly, many Bible scholars have pointed out the similarities between the story of Jonah and Jesus' story of

the "two prodigal sons" (Luke 15).

According to chapters 1 and 2, Jonah initially disobeys God's mission and flees. The sea becomes a great storm and he is thrown into the sea and rescued by a huge fish. He resembles the younger brother in the Prodigal story. The younger son left his loving father, spent his inheritance, and fell into despair. But when he came back to himself and returned to his father, he was accepted with love.

Also, Jonah does not believe in God's mercy and love, even though he seems to be following God's mission correctly according to chapters 3-4. He wanted destruction of Nineveh. He is compared to his older brother in the Prodigal story, who seems to have stayed with the father and served him faithfully. He was angry when the father forgave and accepted his younger brother who had returned after his debauchery. He could not accept his father's love for his brother. He just wanted his father's property. He was angry because his share would be reduced if his brother returned.

For Jonah, if Nineveh is to be forgiven and prosper, he would rather die. His hope, his joy, his purpose in life is something other than God. Perhaps it is the prosperity of the Jewish people, the blessing of his country, the happiness of those he desires and loves. It is a wonderful hope. Of course Jonah had a close relationship with God. But at the same time, he has something in his heart that is more valuable than God.

Jonah's outburst of anger implies that he is willing to abandon God if God does not give him the purpose, joy, and importance in life that he wants. So his thought is this. "God, if you give me what I want, I will serve you. But if you don't give it to me, I will no longer follow you." Do you have a similar thought in your mind?

## **2. God's Treatment of Jonah**

God is very patient and merciful with Jonah. Jonah builds a hut to the east of Nineveh and watches over it. Of course, he secretly hoped to see its destruction.

"Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'" (Jonah 4:6-8)

Two things are emphasized here. The first is that God is showing mercy to Jonah, who is grumpy and angry. His attitude is hardly worthy of God's mercy. Nevertheless, God responds to Jonah's arrogant and haughty needs and extends His hand of mercy.

This is the second time Jonah experienced God's mercy. Previously, Jonah could have been judged for disobeying the Lord without going to Nineveh. He could have been thrown into the sea and drowned, but God rescued him with a huge fish. He received God's mercy and grace, and confessed as follows.

"Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!" (Jonah 2:8,9)

However, even though Jonah has tasted the grace of God, he is still stubborn and insists that he is right. This is the second point that is emphasized here. When the sesame tree grew and provided shade, he was happy. But he didn't recognize it as a blessing from God.

And when a worm attacked the sesame tree so that it withered, tormented by the strong sun and hot wind, he became weak and wished for his own death, muttering, "I would rather die than live." Jonah is in a weak state. In spite of this, he is still stubborn and self-righteous; he thinks he is right.

"But God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be angry for the plant?' And he said, 'Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.'" (Jonah 4:9)

We try to find our joy and purpose in something other than God, and when that doesn't happen, it's easy to fall into self-hatred. We fall into self-pity and think, "I'm hopeless. I'd be better off without God. I'm so miserable. No one will ever accept me." You will be constantly bouncing back and forth between the two extremes of anger and self-loathing. You will be tormented by anger, anxiety and disappointment.

However, my brothers and sisters, so many times God was merciful and slow to anger with Jonah even though he deserved judgment. In the first two chapters, God provided a huge fish. Jonah said, "Salvation belongs to the Lord." He thanked God for His grace. The sin of self-righteousness seems to have been diminished.

However, it is not completely gone. Even though Jonah had survived by God's perfect grace, he still had the nagging feeling that he deserved to be saved. Jonah's situation shows us that it takes a long time and experience to truly understand God's grace. To be transformed by God's grace is a long journey through many different stages of life, suffering and rejoicing, testing and thanking.

### **3. God's Mercy**

Now, how are we to be transformed on such a spiritual journey? Last week I told you that those who call on the name of the Lord are more than prophets of the Old Testament. Prophets are spoken to by God, walk closely with Him, and trust Him as deeply as a friend. But we have been filled with the Holy Spirit, and we know God more than the prophets, we are loved by God, and we walk closely with God. If that is the case, why can't we feel God more intimately than the prophets and experience the reality of God in our daily lives? What a powerless walk....

That's because God gave us Jesus, sent the Holy Spirit, gave us all of Himself, and yet we are preoccupied with something else. It is because God has turned his face toward us, but we do not turn our face back, we do not look at him, we turn away like Jonah.

However, the Lord challenged Jonah in the following way.

"And the Lord said, 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?'" (Jonah 4:10,11)

What I want you to pay attention to is the phrase "spare". Jonah is feeling sorry for the sesame tree. He is feeling sorry for something that he did nothing for, but was given to

him as a blessing from God. And God is sparing Nineveh. He is feeling sorry for Nineveh, which He created, made alive, and loves. Do you notice the comparison and contrast between Jonah's feeling sorry for and God's will to feel sorry for?

The word that is used here, "regret" (mercy), refers to an emotion so strong that it makes you sad or breaks your heart for something. It means something like weeping because of it. Jonah is very attached to the tree and loves it very much, but Jonah has not done anything for it. But God is pouring out His power and love abundantly for Nineveh and the people of that city to make it His own.

Moreover, the only reason why Jonah had feelings toward the tree was because it provided shade and met his needs. In other words, the tree has merit and benefit. God provides it them because it is necessary for Jonah. However, God is eternal, unchanging, omniscient, omnipotent, and self-sufficient in all things. Therefore, he has no need of anything.

Rather, God loves Nineveh freely and spontaneously, without any conditions, so to speak, even though they are a rebellious, evil, sin infested, and cruel people. What happens in Nineveh moves God's heart, and He is grieved by them. If so, how much can God spare us, modern Tokyo?

If Jonah had known even a little of God's long-suffering (mercy), he would have mourned and wept for the city of Nineveh. If he was a prophet of the Lord, he would have proclaimed the word of God with a heart of mercy. Jonah's heart did not move him to weep for this great city. But (do you know this?) Jesus Christ wept.

"And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.'" (Luke 19:41-44)

God referred to the people of Nineveh as those who "knew neither right nor left". In the same way, Jesus prayed for those who despised Him by putting Him on the cross.

"And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" (Luke 23:34)

Jesus knew that no one understood the true meaning of what he was doing when they wanted to crucify and kill him. With tears in his eyes, he prays for forgiveness for them because they are sinners. What a great mercy! It is a perfect love that does not judge sin, but forgives. Jesus is the God of mercy in Jonah 4, taking on human form!

And that is where the book of Jonah ends. It doesn't say how Jonah responded. It is for you to apply God's message in this story to your own life, to your city (Tokyo), to the people among whom we live.