

## Message Series: Unrelenting Love

God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels | The Story of Jonah

### Message Title: A Prophet Learns Who God Is

By: Neil Silverberg

#### Scripture Text: Jonah 4

This is the fourth and final message in the series based on the book of Jonah. We have preached one message from each chapter over the last few weeks. I read an outline of the book of Jonah from another sermon series that broke down the chapters like this: Jonah *flees* (chapter 1), Jonah *prays* (chapter 2), Jonah *preaches* (chapter 3), and Jonah *pouts*, (chapter 4). Here, as this chapter opens, we see Jonah pouting about what God has done. When the story first opened we saw Jonah running from Nineveh to Tarshish but we were not told why he was running. He gets on board a ship and heads to Tarshish, or as far away from Nineveh as he possibly could.

There are many theories about why he was afraid to go to Nineveh. Some have said he was afraid if he preached there he would die (he knew what kind of people the Ninevehites were). We know from historical records they were a cruel, violent and barbaric people. It is true he might have a reason to be afraid but it wasn't primarily fear that kept him from going. Perhaps, he knew that if God spared them they would end up persecuting his people Israel and Jonah was fiercely nationalistic. It is true that Jonah loved his country and was no doubt concerned that if God spared the Ninevehites they might persecute his people. But that is not the main reason for Jonah's refusal to go.

It is here in this final chapter that we learn why Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. *Jonah refused to go not because he was scared nor concerned for Israel's wellbeing, but because he knew that God, being merciful, might forgive the Ninevehites.* And Jonah couldn't stand the thought God might be merciful to these people. After Jonah was swallowed by the fish, he then consented to go to Nineveh and preach, but the very thing Jonah feared the most came upon him—*God spared the entire city of Nineveh by granting them repentance as they heard the word of the Lord.* When chapter four opens, we find Jonah 'pouting' over the fact that God spared the people of Nineveh. Remember last week, we saw how the writer of this book used a certain word that occurs several times. It is the Hebrew word 'gadol' and it simply means 'great'. There was a 'great' storm that threatened the sailors and a 'great' fish that swallowed Jonah and then a 'great' city he was called to preach in.

There is one final use of the word *great* in this story and it's found in verse. Chapter 4, verse 1. The ESV says, "It displeased Jonah 'exceedingly' when he saw that God had mercy on Nineveh." That word 'exceedingly' is again the Hebrew word 'gadol'. Literally, it means that he was *greatly* displeased to the point that he was livid. In layman's terms, Jonah is bummed. He is really bummed! And then, get this, he prays to God in his anger:

*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. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.*

Do you know what we are reading? *Here is a man who has perfect knowledge of God and even quotes Scripture when he prays, but has no heart for the lost.* God wants to have mercy on lost, evil people and Jonah has no heart for this. Rather, he has a hard, judgmental heart for those who are lost. In this, Jonah perfectly mirrors the older brother in

the Parable of the Prodigal. Remember the elder brother who was angry that God was lavishly showing mercy to his undeserving, rebellious brother.

There are three things we can glean from this chapter. And these are not only taught in this chapter, they happen to be the most relevant things I could say to you in light of where we have come as a community. I pray that God would really write these on our hearts:

### ***1. God uses mission to expose the heart of his servant***

If God had told Jonah to go to Israel his own people he could have handled it. But because he sends him on a mission of mercy to his enemies, Jonah's heart is exposed. Jonah has no heart for the people God is showing mercy to. Just like the elder brother in the parable, he is angered at the way God dispenses his mercy on the undeserving. He doesn't think that these people deserve being forgiven. In this, we can see that Jonah's heart is self-righteous. "*God, we're the righteous ones and they are wicked. You should destroy the wicked and vindicate the righteous.*" You can see Jonah's self-righteous heart in the fact that he leaves the city and builds a booth so he can hopefully have a front row seat when God destroys the city. *In all of this, it is the mission that exposes how unmerciful and hard Jonah's heart is.*

#### **I firmly believe that mission is not only intended to reach the lost, but to expose our hard, self-righteous hearts.**

Fast forward eight centuries when the Greater Jonah is on mission. He is sitting and eating with tax collectors and harlots. When the Pharisees and scribes see this their self-righteous hearts are exposed: "*Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?*" For them, being righteous means you avoid these types of people but Jesus is freely moving among them. So what's your excuse and mine for not regularly relating to sinners? They curse? Drink alcohol? Use bad language? Someone recently said, "I really want to quit my job so I can work around Christians." Why do you think God put you where you are? "I'm really more comfortable around Christians." So am I, but God has called us to be like Jesus who said He came to "*seek and save that which is lost.*" Jesus didn't set up shop somewhere and invite sinners to come to Him. He actively sought out the lost. Remember another incident, where a Jewish apostle is having great results reaching out to his Jewish people. He has no problem with that; he's a Jew and knows how to relate to Jews. Suddenly one day, he's praying on a rooftop and sees a vision of a sheet with ham hocks, bacon bits, tongue (non-Jewish food) and hears a voice saying, "Arise, Peter; kill and eat". He responds, "No way, Lord. I rebuke you, Satan". But its God not telling him to eat unclean foods but to go to people he previously considered unclean (Gentiles). Peter's first response is "No way." He could never stoop so low as to go to these Gentiles. Like the Pharisees and Peter at first, mission exposes their self-righteous hearts. And what do you think keeps you and I from being on mission?

### ***2. Jonah's more concerned with his own comfort than the mission***

This entire episode reveals what is most important to Jonah: comfort and security. The first thing he does is build a shelter for himself and sit and watch the city. What a picture? Jonah pouting, leaves the city and sits outside to watch. Do you know what is amazing about this story? God, at first, comforts Jonah by appointing a plant to give him shade. Jonah is happy. But in the morning, God appoints a worm to eat the plant and it withers. And then a scorching east wind and sun beats down on Jonah so that he prays to die. When God confronts him he exposes the fact that he is more concerned with his comfort than he is the 120,000 people in the city who would have perished.

*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 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?"*

Jonah 4:10-11

What a picture of the church: sitting outside the city, pouting because we don't have more blessings. **We are more concerned with our own comfort than with God's mission.** You know why we are like this? Because mission is uncomfortable; it is messy. It will take us outside our comfort zone. Jonah can't believe that God would send him to his enemies. *Mission means that God is working outside your comfort zone.* You know, I thought about this and realized something: while it is true that Jonah was uncomfortable with mission, he really has a theological problem—*he is uncomfortable with God's grace.* Grace means that we are getting what we don't deserve. But after a while, the righteous can begin to feel like they do deserve this salvation and begin to look down their noses at others. Grace is costly. It means I have to forgive people who aren't asking for it and love the unloving. Grace is extravagant; it knows no limits. Grace is risky; it means that it will press me to live on the razor edge of faith.

***But make no mistake about it; grace will take you out of your comfort zone.*** God loves not only forgiving people that don't deserve it; he then invites them to the banquet table and makes them sons and daughters. It's so easy to miss the grace of God and make the Gospel about my own comfort and security. Our churches are filled with self-righteous people who have made the Gospel about what they can get from God for their own security and comfort and have no heart for the lost. Because it would be uncomfortable and call him to radical change, Jonah ran from the mission... And so do we! We leave it up to missionaries and paid professionals to reach the lost. I know that this vision to do church in more than one location is uncomfortable but that's because the reason for our doing more than any other is God has put mission on our heart. We don't want to passively sit and wait for people to come to us but actively pursue them. Pray church. Pray that God gives you his grace so that you follow Jesus in "seeking and saving the lost".

Finally, ***Jonah's story is our story we can know God and yet have no heart for the lost.*** When Jonah's story ends, God asks him a question. We don't even get to see how Jonah responded? And maybe the story ends with the question because it is a question God asks of all of us: *"How will you respond?"* I think this chapter has this message for all of us: *it is not enough to know God, in reaching the lost we must have his heart.* Jonah is a Hebrew and has acknowledged God. When he told the sailors who he was he told them that he feared the Lord, the God who made everything.

Jonah knew that God was Creator. When he prayed from the belly of the fish he quoted numerous Psalms making it obvious that he knew a lot of Bible. But yet, in all of his knowledge of God, he does not share God's heart for the lost. He lived in that typical bubble that Christians live in: that now that we are saved and know God we have to stay away from those sinners. *The real problem had nothing to do with evangelism; it had to do with the fact that Jonah did not have God's heart.* Let me remind you how big the heart of God is. Jonah is sent on a mission to the Assyrians. They were one of the most barbaric, cruel and violent people who ever lived on the earth.

Remember what I read to you from an Assyrian monument in message one of this series. It was the record of an Assyrian military ruler describing what he did to people he conquered: *"I destroyed, I demolished, I burned, I took their warriors prisoners and impaled them on stakes before their cities....flayed the nobles, as many as had rebelled,*

*and spread their skins out on the piles of the dead corpses....many captive I burned in a fire. Many I took alive; from some I cut off their hands to the wrist' from others I cut off noses, ears and fingers; I put out the eyes of many of the soldiers.”* But get this: God loved this people and sent a Jewish prophet to them so that they could be saved. We are on the same mission, to go and seek and save that which is lost. That's why we are doing what we are doing at TCC.

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***The questions below are provided by Ed Rosen for you to use in House Church Group Discussions.***

1. Neil said we can glean three things from chapter 4 of Jonah. The first is: God uses mission to expose the heart of his servant.

- a. Is it possible there might be some self-righteousness lurking in your heart with regard to the lost?
- b. Jesus regularly related to all kinds of sinners, those considered the lowest of the low in Israel at that time. Are you regularly relating to sinners?
- c. If not what is your excuse?
- d. Are you open to seeking God to change your heart by the power of the Holy Spirit? He changed Peter's heart, He can change yours also!

2. The second is: Jonah's more concerned with his own comfort than the mission.

- a. In what way is the church like Jonah sitting outside the city pouting because we don't have more blessings?
- b. Is reaching out to the lost outside your comfort and security zone? Explain.

3. The third is: Jonah's story is our story/ we can know God and yet have no heart for the lost.

- a. Read the question that God asked Jonah at the very end of the book (Ch. 4:11) and substitute Knoxville and its surrounding area and then answer the question. If you answered in the affirmative, how are you cooperating with God's mission "to seek and to save the lost"?
- b. Is part of your prayer life asking God to give you daily divine appointments?