

#0219 - March 5, 2009 A Gracious God, a Grumbling Prophet, Part 2 Jonah 4:1-11

[Easley:] So when Israel read the story and when you and I read the story I think the question we have to move away from the story so close and ask, "Am I self-righteous in my view of how God administers His grace? Is there a spiritual smugness in my soul that I don't like the way God works? And if you boil it down, just kill me God because I don't like the way You do it."

[Lepine:] This is *inContext* with Michael Easley; I'm Bob Lepine. We've been looking last week and again this week at the book of Jonah in the Old Testament and Michael, if Jonah was a movie, or even if it was a novel, ending where it ends, we would say, "Somebody left off chapter five; the happy resolution of the story."

[Easley:] What' up with that? Yeah.

[Lepine:] It ends with this question. Let me just read this. Here is the question that the LORD has for Jonah:

"Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

[Easley:] [Laughs]

[Lepine:] That's it. It stops right there. I mean, you read that and go, "Isn't there a chapter five somewhere?"

[Easley:] Actually this is a perfect IFC film.

[Lepine:] [Laughs] That's a good one.

[Easley:] It ends with a what? You know, you're too stupid to figure it out. Yeah. I love when the Bible doesn't conclude the way we want it to. There are many Psalms that end with us hanging on a cliff. Will God "come through?" Will He answer my petition? This question is square in the face of all the cynics who don't like the way God works.

[Lepine:] Mmm hmm.

[Easley:] How are you going to respond?

[Lepine:] Most people know the story of Jonah; about the reluctant prophet who was thrown overboard and was swallowed by a great fish and then went to Nineveh and preached a message of repentance and revival broke out. But only a few people know chapter four where Jonah is pouting because of the repentance of the Ninevites and God sends a shade tree, actually like a weed -

[Easley:] Mmm hmm.

[Lepine:] - that sprouts up to provide some shade for Jonah and then Jonah's still not happy. Then God sends a worm to cut down the shade tree and rebukes Jonah and then the story's over.

[Easley:] Yeah.

[Lepine:] And that's where we find ourselves as we pick up your message here today in Jonah Chapter four.

[Easley:] I want to write a series of messages someday on questions God asks. If you think with me through Genesis, in fact let's just are over there. We have a few moments to turn over to Genesis chapter two. Actually I believe it starts in Genesis chapter three. Do you know what the first question God asked man was? It's in verse nine of chapter three. "Where are you?"

Was He playing hide and seek with Adam? No. Adam had violated the one prohibition not to eat the fruit. The woman and the man had taken of the fruit and eaten it. They had become like God in that they knew good and evil and when God comes in the cool of the day, and in my sanctified imagination I have a picture of Jesus Christ, some called it a Theophany and others call it a Christophany; I think Jesus came in the cool of the day and He walked and He talked with the man and the woman and His question was, "Where are you?" because Adam's gone hiding.

Adam is aware of his nakedness and his shame and he is now afraid to see God in the garden so the question isn't hide and seek; the question is, "Where are you in relationship to Me because before this day we had a fellowship. We talked. We walked together in some respect and now you are hiding."

Drop down to verse eleven. "Who told you you were naked?" Just take those questions. "Where are you? Where are you in relationship to Me? Who told you you were naked? How do you know? Because you've sinned."

Verse thirteen. "What is this you have done?" He addresses this to the woman. "What in the world have you done?"

Do you know what the fourth question is? Turn over to chapter four. You know the story of Cain and Abel where Abel brings the firstling of his flock and Cain brought the offering that God had no regard for. Verse six:

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry?"

Look at the progression. Where are you? Who told you you were naked? What have you done? Why are you angry? That question will go all through Scripture clear up to Jonah's time. Do you have good reason to be angry? What is anger? Anger is a lot of things.

Anger is injustice. Anger is fear. Anger is a secondary emotion sometimes; there's something else going on but I manifest it in anger. If a person gets defensive and angry when you ask a question, there's something going on; anger is not the first emotion, is it? They are exposed. They are guilty. They are ashamed. They're afraid and so they lash out to push you to keep you at bay and Jonah is mad at God. The question is not that hard for you and me to apply. What are you angry about what God is doing?

We don't like the way You're doling out grace. We don't like the way You're issuing Your sovereign plan. We don't like the way You're saving the Assyrians or the Ninevites. We don't like the way You're saving those pagan sailors. We don't like the way You're saving Muslims? We don't like the way you're saving that other ethnic group that's not my ethnic group. I don't know what it might be but we learn a lesson from Jonah that he's angry.

"Do you have good reason," verse nine, "to be angry about the plant?" The question is loaded.

"I've provided a little shade for you. Jonah you're more concerned about the shade than the Ninevites' souls."

Jonah's frustration turns out in the theory of a weapon of his own indictment against himself. The last portion of verse nine really is an expletive in the language. Look at verse nine again.

"I have good reason to be angry, even to death."

If I gave you a colloquialism you'd be upset with what I would say. He's shaking his fist and cussing God.

"Yes, I have good reason to be angry. How can I go on living in a world where my plant died?"

Leslie Allen writes, "Let's analyze this anger of yours, Jonah. It represents your concern over your beloved plant, but what did it really mean? Your attachment could not be very deep; it was here one day and gone the next. Your concern was dictated by self-interest and not love. You never had the devotion of a gardener. If you feel as badly as you do, what would you expect a gardener to feel like who tended the plant and watched it grow only to see it wither and die? Poor thing."

"This is how I feel about Nineveh only much more so. All those people, all those animals, I made them. Nineveh means the world to me. Your pain is nothing to mine when I contemplate their destruction."

It's pretty good. The first question to Jonah was, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" The second question was, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" Let's pick it up at verse nine again:

*Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."
Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant from which you did not work in which you did not cause to grow, which came up over night in perished overnight.
Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between the right and left hand, as well as many animals?"*

The book ends with this unanswered question. I kind of like it that way. I think the book is ending so that the Hebrew ear, the Jew, the Israelite who would hear the story all the way up to today would be left with the same question. Do you understand God's

compassion and love and grace to those who do not know Him over against the things of the world on which we cling?

Bernard Shaw wrote, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself therefore all progress depends upon the unreasonable man."

The unreasonableness of the Gospel that God loves the loveless. He loves those who shake their fists at Him. He loves those who curse Him. He even loves our complicated hero, Jonah.

When we think about Western Christianity and the way we view life, that if you do this then that will follow; if you go to high school and make good grades, if you go to college and get a degree, if you get a good job and you work hard, if you spend less than you earn, if you save your money, if you marry a good wife or if you marry a good husband. Like Socrates said, "If you marry a good wife you'll be happy; if not, you become a philosopher." [Laughter]

You go on the line. You do all these little things. You have 2.5 children (now it's 1.4), you buy a starter home, you buy a better home, you buy a lake house at Marinatha, you go on and on and on and on and life is supposed to work a certain way in this Western notion of Christianity. If we took the threads of Westernism out of our Christianity, I fear the fabric of our faith would unravel.

We have to see the book of Jonah as the only book that succeeded. 120,000 some people came to Christ. If you go with my numbers I think it's twice that. Not to mention those on the boat. Hundred years from this time Nahum of course will tell us a different story. This is the most incredible revival in Old Testament history that we have on record and the prophet who delivered the goods is depressed. No other prophet had this type of response that we know of.

Certainly there were kingdoms that were built under David and Solomon's time. Certainly there were armies that were conquered and enemies that were defeated and spoils that were taken and all kinds of blessing. The city of Jerusalem was an incredible testimony to God's protection and kindness but they all failed. This guy is the Western picture of success and at the end of the story he is clinically depressed.

The book ends with a question. Do you understand My compassion? Do you understand My grace? It's not like the way you think it ought to work as a Jew. Well let me give you a number of more helpful lessons than that one, because I can tell you don't like that one. [Laughter]

Number one, God gives shade even when we are ticked. When I worked as a mechanic, we had these big chicken house fans that were about four feet wide and we built these plywood boxes and put a wire mesh on them, put a few wheels on them, plugged them into a 220 outlet and we would wheel them over right beside the truck we were working on so your hair kinda went at one angle but it was this nice, cool breeze that blew because it was hot. East Texas was, it was miserable in the summer and you worked on chicken trucks and they didn't smell very good. And so you put that fan right beside you to blow the odor away and to keep you cool.

Every once in a while we would overload the electricity in the shop and the compressors and all the power would go out. We didn't care about anything but the fan. We became the grumpiest most ornery most un-workable people on the planet. We'd like go on strike until the power came back on and they got our fans going again because it was too hot to work on those smelly old trucks without a fan right beside you blowing so you couldn't hear one another talk. It didn't matter it just kept the air moving and all we worried about was our shade.

I often remember when I get hot and frustrated, and my wife can tell you I don't like the heat, and when I get hot and sweaty and miserable I think that Jonah grumbled about shade and I'm grumbling because I'm little bit warm. It's a good spiritual reminder. We grumble about the smallest things and God gives us shade. It's a good picture of His grace.

Secondly, God wants us to give the same kind of grace that He gave to us. Grace is a marvelous thing. The word I skipped over and want to come back to for just a moment is in verse two:

[God is] *slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness.*

I often harp on this little word. I think it's the most important word in the Old Testament. There are three characters in the Hebrew, roughly HSD, probably pronounced *khesed* with a little "k" sound; *Khesed*. *Khesed* is one of these words you cannot pin down. I love the way the new American Standard uses the cumbersome word lovingkindness. Other English translations may say love or mercy or kindness and I think it's unfortunate because it needs to be a cumbersome, unusual word because it is a cumbersome and unusual word.

The word means two things. It means God loves to be loyal to His covenant and He loves to be loyal to His people. The character of God is He loves to be loyal to what He said and He loves to be loyal to the people He chose. When Jonah says, "I knew You were gracious. I knew You were compassionate and I knew You were loyal to Your word and loyal to Your chosen people," lovingkindness is the closest word we have in the Old Testament Hebrew to our cousin in the New Testament, grace. For by grace you have been saved through faith.

So if you are an NASB user, every time you see that word lovingkindness you ought to circle it because the NASB was consistent every time they came across *khesed* we want to put an unusual word there so people understand that it's a very important term in the Old Testament. This is the only time it occurs in the book of Jonah. He's acknowledging, "I knew You were a 'khesed' God. I knew You were a loyal God. You are a loving, kind God and I don't like that about Your character if it doesn't apply to me. I like it as long as it applies to me and my Jewish people and my Jewish lineage, but I don't like it if it applies to others."

Thirdly, Jonah seems to prefer a life of frustration and bitterness and depression. He seems to prefer a life of bitterness, frustration and depression. Do you know anyone that likes to be unhappy? Do you know people like that? I know some people like that. I often tell Cindy that I'd love to get that person under truth serum and bright white lights and say, "Tell me about one time in your childhood when you were happy."

Some people just like to be unhappy. It's sort of like Eeyore. You know, Eeyore just liked to be unhappy, didn't he?

[In Eeyore tone] "It's just my birthday."

"Nobody loves me."

"It's just this old balloon."

"I don't have any friends."

"Blah blah."

It's a great picture of people that just like to be unhappy. I think there is a spiritual malaise among Christians. When your kids, when they have everything going for them you want to say, "Be happy!"

Okay I'm the only parent that feels that way. There are times I want to just sort of dope slap my children and say, "Be happy! You don't understand the things you have."

Do you ever say that your kids?

"When I was a kid I had a stick and a dirt clod. [Laughter] You have everything."

"Well, we don't have a Nintendo or a Wii." or "We're the only people in the universe without a Wii." "We don't have a dog."

You know I say, "Give me a break. You have everything else. You have computers. You have the Internet. You have skateboards. You have bicycles. You have sports. You have a room with a fan in it." [Laughter]

I don't have a lot of patience and you know, my parents didn't have a lot of patience because compared to them, I had everything. That's always the way it is, isn't it? And when I see my kids complain and whine like that I go, "Michael, you're just the same. You're just the same. You whine about things that don't go your way. You like to be depressed sometimes. You like to be unhappy sometimes. Snap out of it!"

Sometimes as my friend Dave Gibson says, "Easley, you need a spiritual dope slap."

You need someone to just sort of knock some sense into you and say "Snap out of it!"

Why are you depressed and in frustration and bitter? Why are you like Eeyore? It has no value. It doesn't do anything for your spiritual life but it's easy to go there for some of us. Some of us are possessed by our possessions or possessed by the things of the world or possessed by making life work. I think if you're going to be possessed by anything you need to be possessed by your walk with Christ and the relationships that God gives you to carry you through this life.

When I'm more concerned about my personal comfort than my personal relationship with Christ, I've got a problem. When my pain distracts me to the point that I read my Scripture this morning and I can't focus on it, I get frustrated with myself because I know

the momentary, light affliction is producing in me an eternal weight of glory, and I don't like it. Do you care more for your happiness or for your holiness?

One author writes, "He creates his own domain in the shade where he will be at peace according to his own measure just as Christians try to make a church or a world according to their own measure. It is not the body of Christ. And a divine kingdom according to their own measure full of good intentions that are effective and well constructed but many of them are only a fresh demonstration of their autonomy and their relationship with God."

In this book, four times Jonah explicitly or implicitly says, "God, kill me." This is a man that doesn't understand God's grace. Jonah acted because he understood God's consistent character, but he didn't like the way he measured out that character to others.

I don't know how you'll wrap up the book in your own mind but I came across a statement that I think sums it up pretty well. Listen to what Bob Deffenbaugh writes.

"Jonah had compassion on the plant in which he had no investment. God has compassion on people which He created; for whom He has prepared a promised blessing."

Bob goes on to say, "The only person that doesn't like grace is the self-righteous person."

When I think that I have a better way. When I think that I have a better plan. When I think that I know how God ought to do it, that's what I am self-righteous. So the book ends. God says, "Shouldn't I have compassion on people? Shouldn't I be gracious to people who don't know their left hand from the right hand? And oh, by the way, they have some animals too."

It's almost pejorative. Don't you care? You cared about a plant for goodness sakes. Don't you care about the dog and the cat and the cow? Where is your compassion Jonah?

And the self righteous man and a self-righteous woman are smug in their intentions who folds their arms and says, "I don't like the way You work Your grace. I like the way You work Your favor. I don't like the way You work Your kindness."

Jonah is a book where everyone cooperates except Jonah; everyone understands and gets who God is, even the whole city of Nineveh. So when Israel read the story and when you and I read the story I think the question we have to move from the story so close and ask is, "Am I self-righteous in my view of how God administers His grace? Is there a spiritual smugness in my soul that I don't like the way God works and if you boil it down, 'Just kill me, God because I don't like the way You do it.'"

It's where the penitent sinner beats his chest and bows his head, "Be merciful to me, the sinner."

That's the level ground before Calvary.

[Lepine:] You know Michael, as we listen to this end of chapter four, the end of the story in the Scriptures about Jonah, I think the question that you ask about our own focus is a penetrating one because for many of us our own comfort, our own stuff is more valuable to us than people who need to know Christ. We need the same kind of re-orientation that Jonah had to recognize what's really important to God and get on His page, right?

[Easley:] If these messages recalibrate us Bob, then that's a good thing. We are creature comfort oriented. I've said it many times Bob, Western Christianity is so interwoven with material prosperity and blessing that if we take those things away it dismantles our faith.

We are in an economic crisis. We are in a new day. Wars are still clamoring around. Uncertain futures of large corporations are around us if this does not get the believer's attention, we cannot fix our hope on this planet. Our hope is in Christ and you and I hold the Gospel. We hold the most important, vital message in our hands. Will we run the risk of sharing that with somebody who doesn't know Christ?

[Lepine:] Mmm hmm.

[Easley:] If there's a message of Jonah for each of us it's, "Get away from your self-righteous critical attitude and see people the way Jesus sees them; as lost and in need of a Savior."

[Lepine:] Yeah and I think in these days in particular, as folks are anxious about the economy or what's going on in the world politically or with military situations; wars going on, I think we have an opportunity to show that in Christ we have joy, we are content, we have peace and that's going to be confounding to our friends and neighbors and that does give us an opportunity then to say, "You know, the hope for the world is not in the Dow Jones industrial average and it's not in military might. The hope for the world is in Christ and whatever's going on in the world markets or on the battlefield, we've got to be focused on God and His Word as our source of hope and our source of joy."

You know it's been good to spend a few weeks looking at the book of Jonah. I want to remind listeners that your four messages from this book are available on audio CDs and you can find out more about how you can receive those CDs on our website, incontextradio.org. We got an e-mail from a listener recently who wrote and said, "We listen to *inContext* in the mornings and then we download the transcripts. We are in our 70s and we like to study from the written pages and then when we're done we mail the transcripts to friends and use them as we teach others."

When I read that I thought, "What a great compliment that is." Thank you for listening and for writing to us and if you'd like to write to us our address is inContext@moody.edu. We'd love to get an e-mail from you.

I hope you'll be back with us tomorrow. We're going to talk with John Kotter who is a professor at the Harvard business school about leadership and about change. An interesting interview is coming up tomorrow. I hope you can join us for *inContext* with Michael Easley.