

4. Jonah - Learning the Hard Way: God trains Jonah to be a missionary who loves the lost

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[0 : 00] Well, you might like to turn to Jonah chapter 4 on page 775.

I'm very conscious of the angle of my tie, but it should not be squint. Fortunately, you can't see whether my shirt flaps are showing or not, because of this fine, mighty pulpit.

Well, now, tonight we're in the final chapter, the fourth chapter of the book of Jonah, and I'd like to give a title to our study for tonight. In these words, God trains Jonah to be a missionary who loves the lost.

Now, God's training of Jonah is really the subject of the book of Jonah. And even when we get to the end of chapter 4, we feel that the training is hardly complete, because Jonah still appears to be a cross-old curmudgeon at the very end.

And in the final verse, and we're going to look at this final verse quite a bit tonight, the Lord launches a great question at Jonah, forcing him to assess the whole direction of his life.

[1 : 19] And that's a question that requires an answer. And we can't help imagining an unwritten fifth chapter in which Jonah answers this great question of God and finally brings his life into line with God's will.

So it's a process of training which is taking place throughout the book of Jonah. If Jonah himself is the author of the book, and I think there are good reasons for thinking he may be, he is recording his testimony for future generations.

He's telling the whole world down the centuries, I was an award-winning idiot. And not only an idiot, I was ungodly, disobedient and rebellious.

The Lord gave me this clear command, and I fled off, I fled out of his presence, or tried to. But the Lord, he wouldn't have it, and he stopped me in my tracks and put me through a death and resurrection experience, which was very traumatic.

And even after my living death experience, I was far from being persuaded that the work that he was giving me to do was good work. Oh yes, I went off to Nineveh, but with bad grace.

[2 : 30] And when I saw that the Lord had spared the Ninevites rather than destroying them, I was very angry, and he had to continue my training with further unpleasant experiences, and also by talking to me and asking me certain questions.

But I learned in the end. And I am recording my testimony so that you, my readers, can learn for yourselves what I learned about God. But I hope that you perhaps won't have to go through the same sort of experience that I had to go through at the bottom of the sea as you learn.

So if this book is the record of how God trained Jonah, it's here in the Bible to train us and to school us in God's ways and values.

We know from the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3.16 that all scripture is breathed out by God. So the book of Jonah is breathed out by God.

And it's profitable, says Paul, for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. Part of the scripture's purpose is to train us in what it means to live a godly life.

[3 : 39] So isn't God kind to train us like this? He takes the baby Christian, the Christian who's now saved and truly his child, and he then trains up that baby Christian to increasing maturity.

And it's the Bible that God uses to do the training. The Bible is his training manual. And don't we need training all the time?

When we're baby Christians, yes, we belong to the Lord fully. We're fully saved. We're bound for heaven. But we are still as full of worldly values as a sardine tin is of sardines.

But over time, through the Bible, and through our study of the Bible, the Lord removes the sardines of worldly thinking, one by one, and replaces them with heavenly values, with heavenly thinking. So he teaches us to think about life as he thinks about life. And so to study the Bible lifelong is to submit to the Lord's process, his gracious process, whereby he rearranges our mental furniture. [4 : 43] How long does it take the Lord to train us? Is the training all done in five years or ten years? No. Even after ten years, it's probably only just about God off the ground.

And this is one of the delights of being a Christian. It's a lifelong experience of being trained. You think of your poor sportsmen, your footballers and rugby players and so on. They're finished, aren't they, at the age of about 30.

But servants of Christ, very often, are only just about getting going at the age of 30. If you are a person who is under 30, you've only had the soup course so far.

All the best bits are still in front of you. The roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, the profiteroles and custard, the coffee and the chocolate mints. It's all to come. Now, the Christian life has its hard aspects.

There's self-denial involved, very much so, and hard work. Jonah had to experience a kind of death as the Lord was fitting him for service. But the Lord is wonderfully kind to his people as he trains us.

[5 : 47] And he keeps on this training. It's a lifelong business, both to fit us for heaven in the big future, but also to fit us out for active and useful service while we're still on earth.

So the training that the Lord gave to Jonah is written here by Jonah, or if not by Jonah, somebody close to him, as part of our training. The lessons that Jonah learned, he is passing on to us for our learning.

God was training Jonah to be a missionary who loved the lost. And that is the training that he passes on to our generation today. Well, let's pick up the story at chapter 3 and verse 10, which I think is where Willie picked it up in the reading.

When God saw what they did, that's the Ninevites, 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.

Now, you might be tempted to think that that tenth verse is a verse of good news. God has pronounced disaster and destruction on the Ninevites, but in his great kindness towards them, he hasn't brought disaster upon them.

[7 : 01] He's refrained from punishing them and blotting them out. And in that sense, it's a very similar thing to the gospel which we read fully displayed in the New Testament, because the whole human race is under the cloud of God's anger.

We deserve his punishment and judgment. And yet God has sent a rescuer, and whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Now, we rightly rejoice at that gospel, don't we? It's wonderful that those who deserve to perish should be able instead to enjoy eternal life. So you'd expect Jonah to rejoice in God's decision to spare the Ninevites.

But what do we find? Chapter 4, verse 1, it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. Now, doesn't that make your jaw drop open with astonishment?

Why was Jonah like that? How could a prophet of the Lord, a man of God, be displeased when the Lord's mercy and kindness is displayed in front of him so brightly?

[8 : 05] Let's see if verse 2 can make us any the wiser. I'm not sure that it can. 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're a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster. I knew you were that sort of a God, a kind God.

It's astonishing, isn't it? Very peculiar. Just contrast this with Jesus. When he approached the city of Jerusalem, remember Jonah sitting there looking at the city of Nineveh.

When Jesus approached the city of Jerusalem just before his death, he was deeply upset because it did not repent and wouldn't repent and therefore would be judged.

But here's Jonah looking at this other great city getting very upset because it did repent and therefore wouldn't be destroyed. So Jonah's values appear to be quite the opposite of Jesus'.

[9 : 04] So what is going on here? Why is Jonah so angry at the repentance of Nineveh? Well, that's not an easy question because the answer to it doesn't lie right on the surface of the text.

But let me suggest two factors, two things which may help us towards the answer. The first is that Jonah was jealous for Israel, that he was jealous for the honor of his own country.

Jonah lived in the 8th century BC, the first half of the 8th century, somewhere around 780 BC. And during that period, Israel was ruled over by a king called Jeroboam II.

And Jeroboam II ruled Israel for a period of 41 years from somewhere in the 790s BC to somewhere in the 750s BC. Now Jeroboam was an able administrator.

And at one level, the country did very well under his shrewd leadership. The borders of the country were strengthened. And in fact, Jonah himself had delivered a prophecy about recapturing part of Israel's lost territory.

[10:12] And that prophecy duly came to pass. So Israel was flourishing and prospering materially. And as far as its military strength was concerned, under Jeroboam II.

But, as 2 Kings chapter 14 tells us, Jeroboam II followed all the sinful ways of Jeroboam I, who lived a hundred and something years before him.

But he followed the idolatry, the godlessness, the wholesale departure from the law of Moses, which Jeroboam I had introduced into Israel when they broke away from Judah.

Now all that must have troubled Jonah, this prophet, deeply. Here he was, regularly, we can imagine, speaking the word of the Lord in Israel, speaking out against the godlessness of his fellow countrymen.

That was what prophets did, after all. It was their job to tell their people to return to the Lord and also to tell them that if they did not return and repent, God would bring disaster on them.

[11:13] In fact, all the disasters and curses that were spelled out in the closing chapters of the book of Deuteronomy. So I think we can imagine what Jonah must have been through in Israel.

He'd been living there for years, announcing coming disaster. The Lord will call you to account. That's what he would have been saying to his contemporaries. And yet, the Israelites, his people, the covenant people, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, would not listen to him or to God.

He longed to see them repent and turn to the Lord and be spared future disaster. But they won't. And yet, here he goes to this pagan and pretty gruesome city where the Assyrian Ninevites lived. And immediately, he began to preach. They repented. They're falling over themselves to repent within five minutes. They can't do it quickly enough. And this is a real repentance.

It's radical. As chapter 3, verse 10 makes clear, they turned from their evil way. So from Jonah's point of view, if these rank outsiders, these Ninevites, are prepared to repent after five minutes of preaching, why won't the Israelites repent?

[12:27] It pains Jonah and grieves him to think of his own countrymen being so obstinate and hard-hearted. It reflects so badly on Israel. Perhaps it makes Jonah realize that Israel is ripe for disaster and punishment.

Her stubbornness proves that her destruction is imminent. And indeed, she was destroyed only a couple of generations later in 721 BC. So Jonah was jealous for the honor of Israel.

But secondly, and I think this is the more important point, the second reason why Jonah was so angry was that he had not yet understood how much God loved his, God's, enemies.

He hadn't yet understood God's compassion for all the peoples of the world, including the cruelest and most horrible people. And the Assyrians were right at the top of the list for cruelty and horribleness.

In fact, Jonah's failure to understand God's love for his enemies was so spectacular that he didn't want to live anymore in a world ruled by that kind of God.

[13:37] In effect, he's saying to God in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 4, if that's the kind of God that you are, and if that's the kind of God that I'm having to serve, I'd rather be dead.

He's not like Paul in Philippians chapter 1 who says, I'd rather die and depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. Jonah's saying something quite different.

He says, I'd rather die so as to get away from the Lord. That's why I fled to Tarshish in the first place, because I couldn't bear to be serving and representing a God like you who I knew was going to be so compassionate and kind.

Now this is fierce, violent language from Jonah. It's the kind of, it's the language of divorce, you might say, of ultimate separation. I've got to get away from you.

That's what he's saying. I can't abide being with you. I'm seeing aspects of your character that I suspected were there, but now I know it because of what's just happened and I hate these aspects of your character.

[14 : 39] And if I can't get away from you, let me die instead. It's a ferocious outburst from Jonah. And yet, the Lord deals with him so gently.

You might expect the Lord to respond by sending him a fireball from heaven to wipe him out. In fact, Jonah is almost inviting God to do just that so as to annihilate him.

But the Lord, with infinite kindness and I think gentleness, and displaying exactly the characteristic that Jonah so dislikes, that is to say, compassion, says to him, do you do well to be angry?

The Lord is gently provoking Jonah at this point to question himself, to ask himself whether this fierce anger might perhaps be inappropriate. But Jonah, you'll see at the end of verse 4, is so angry that he doesn't even reply to the Lord's question.

Instead, he marches out to the east side of the city, he makes a little shelter or booth for himself out of branches because of the hot Middle Eastern sun and he sits there watching the city, no doubt hoping that God will rain fire and brimstone on it and wipe it out and remove the capital of this cruel, aggressive Assyrian empire.

[16 : 01] And then in verse 6, the Lord shows a further compassion and kindness to Jonah. Jonah perhaps wasn't very good at DIY and the suggestion is that his homemade shelter or booth is not keeping all the sun's rays off his head.

So the Lord kindly causes a broad-leaved plant, castor oil plant or whatever it is, to spring up very quickly and this proves to be a better parasol than Jonah's homemade booth and Jonah is very glad to have this plant sheltering his head from the sun.

And Jonah continues to sit there. The sun goes down and the city remains intact. But the next morning we discover that this broad-leaved plant is part of God's training program for Jonah because just as the Lord caused the plant to spring up, so the Lord now causes the plant to wither away because of a worm sent by the Lord to attack the plant.

And shortly afterwards the sun rises and God having appointed the plant and then appointed the worm to kill the plant, now he's still training Jonah, he appoints a scorching east wind.

So Jonah is buffeted by both the sun and the wind and he feels faint. Well you would, wouldn't you? And in the extreme of his exhaustion and discomfort, he again asks the Lord if he can be allowed to die.

[17 : 35] But the Lord whose training program is going on according to plan says to Jonah, do you do well to be angry for the plant? In verse 4 he had merely said to Jonah, do you do well to be angry?

And Jonah had not replied. This time in verse 9 the Lord is more specific. Do you do well to be angry for the plant? So he's forcing Jonah to focus his attention upon this plant for reasons that we'll see in just a moment.

And Jonah replies, yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die. And then in verses 10 and 11 we see why the Lord is making Jonah think like this about the plant.

The Lord has provided the plant and has engineered Jonah's feelings of concern for this plant so as to create a parallel with Nineveh and the Lord's feelings of concern for the people of Nineveh.

So the Lord says, Jonah, you pity this plant to you but what kind of attachment and connection can you really have with this plant and how important is this plant really?

[18 : 52] You didn't work to cultivate it or tend it or water it. You put no effort into this plant at all and in any case it's a will-o'-the-wisp.

It's here today and gone tomorrow. It's only a plant and yet, Jonah, you've entwined your soul around it. It's become so important to you despite its obvious insignificance.

Well, Jonah, if you can feel that kind of compassion and pity towards something so insubstantial, shouldn't I feel pity and compassion towards something infinitely more important, a great city populated by 120,000 people, all of them made in my own image, each one of them created and fashioned lovingly by my hand, each one whose chief end is to glorify me and to enjoy me forever. And yet, these people, they're utterly ignorant, morally and spiritually. In terms of real truth, they can't tell their right hand from their left. And they're more than just individuals, they're a whole community, they're a culture, they have many livestock, there's a great infrastructure there, they are living, breathing, functioning human society.

Now, you didn't labor for that plant, but I've labored for these people, they're the work of my hands, and I cannot bear to see them living a godless, unrepentant life. I'm not only concerned for the Israelites, that they should belong to me, I'm equally concerned for the Gentiles.

[20 : 26] I'm a god big enough for all the nations of the world, because I've made them all. So, Jonah, if you allow yourself to pity that plant, and if your pity for that plant is right and proper, should I not pity something of infinitely more importance and value, a great Gentile city, who have believed my message to them and have turned to me in repentance.

Now, Jonah ends his book, his testimony, if it's right to call it that, with that great question of verse 11. It's the climax of the book. It is, if you like, the high point of Jonah's training in righteousness. And God caused Jonah to finish his book with that question, because that is the question that is addressed to you and me as well for our training. 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?

It's such a powerful question, and the answer to it is so obvious. If Jonah had written a little bit further, if he'd written a chapter 4 verse 12, or a chapter 5, it would have been, yes, Lord, of course you should pity that great Nineveh, that city with its needy population of 120,000 who are ignorant of you.

Of course it's right that you should have sent a prophet so as to bring them to repentance. And I can't help suspecting that that question was ringing in Jonah's ears as he trudged back the 600 miles westwards from Nineveh back to Israel.

[22 : 05] It would have taken him about a month to cover that amount of ground. There was no radio for him to listen to. There'd be nothing to distract his attention, only the quiet stars in the sky by night, and the sand and rock under his feet by day.

And this question in his head as he rode home, should I not pity Nineveh, that great city of 120,000 people? Look back to chapter 3, verse 5.

That verse records a remarkable revival. The people of Nineveh had received Jonah's dire message with utmost seriousness.

He'd seen them running up and down the streets in their distress, calling for sackcloth, proclaiming a fast. He'd even seen their great lords and ladies and their king himself laying aside their fine robes and putting on sackcloth as a token of their repentance.

He'd seen sights that you and I, I guess, have never seen. And yet, after this revival and after his angry outburst and his conversation with the Lord and then this question that he could not forget or throw off, it was with him day after day, boring itself into his soul as he journeyed for a month homewards.

[23 : 25] And by the time he got home, I think we can be sure that he knew the answer to it. And that's why we have this book so that we too should learn the answer to that question and then live out the answer to it in our actual lives.

So let me try and spell out some of the implications of believers who have learnt the meaning of that great question in verse 11. I've got three implications. First, let's ask God to make our hearts compassionately concerned for the salvation of people who are very different from ourselves. I think the world and particularly the world's media train us to think of other people, other people groups in terms of how different they are from us. You might call this the National Geographic Magazine view of other people groups.

Do you know what I mean? The National Geographic Magazine will show you wonderful photography of Inuit people up in the Arctic or Maasai people in East Africa or folk down in Patagonia in the tip of South America.

And the photographs and the written articles that back them up emphasize just how different these people are from the sort of people who are looking at the photographs. So here are the Inuit eating their seal meat and living in houses made of blocks of snow.

[24 : 52] Or here are the Maasai people drinking cow's milk mixed with cow's blood. Here are the Patagonians with their wonderful fabrics and clothes and hairstyles. Now when you look at people from far away places through that kind of lens the emphasis is on how different they are from people like us.

But Jonah chapter 4 verse 11 emphasizes what the Ninevites have in common with Jonah namely the fact that the Lord cares about them and has compassion upon them.

He is concerned for their repentance just as he is concerned for the repentance of the Jews. He is the God who made every people group and is concerned for the salvation of every people group.

Do you remember what Paul said to the Athenians in Acts chapter 17 about the whole population of the world? He said, God made from one man. You see that they united the one origin of the human race.

God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling places that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

[26 : 07] So while at one level it makes good sense for us to speak of the various races of mankind, at a much more important level the Bible views us all together as the human race.

Yes, the various nations differ tremendously in terms of agriculture, architecture, diet, sports, skin color. Some are short, stout and hairy.

Some are tall, thin and smooth. But the Lord says to Jonah, should I not pity Nineveh? Should I not bring them into the same relationship of forgiveness and acceptance and belonging and faith which I want for the Jews?

Of course I should. I'm the God of the whole earth. And at the very end and the book of Revelation opens this up for us wonderfully, people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages will be spread out there standing before the great throne of God and before the Lamb acknowledging that they have been saved by him and him alone.

And look at us here tonight. Are we Jews or Gentiles? I guess there may be one or two here who perhaps have some Jewish ancestry in their blood. But overwhelmingly, we're Gentiles, aren't we?

[27 : 23] Effectively, we're Ninevites. All of us. In fact, we're much further out than the Ninevites. What are we? We're the impious English. We're the iniquitous Irish.

We're the indescribable Scots. So the answer to God's great question in Jonah 4.11 is here in this hall spread out before us tonight.

God has had compassion upon us and has sent us the gospel and has caused people like us to repent and believe in the one Savior. Jonah 4.11 is the Old Testament great commission.

And because Jonah finally learned that God cares about the Ninevites, his testimony still today stirs us up and sends us out with love for people who are very different from ourselves.

So let's pray that God will give all of us a compassionate gospel concern for the people of the globe. Should some folk therefore still go abroad as foreign missionaries?

[28 : 28] Of course. Of course. It isn't appropriate for everybody but it's very appropriate for some as long as you have health and energy, a certain amount of linguistic ability and one or two other skills.

Go to Nineveh. That's part of the message of Jonah. It will apply to some here. Now second, and this is really the reverse side of that first point, let's reject Jonah-type anger.

Chapter 4.1 makes it clear that what displeased Jonah so much was the events of chapter 3.10. It was when Jonah saw the Ninevites repenting and God relenting that he became so angry.

He wanted God to destroy them, to give them what they deserved. This type of anger is well illustrated I think by the story of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son and the older brother.

You remember in Luke chapter 15 how the older brother there gets very angry with the father and effectively he says to the father as he sees the father welcoming back his younger brother, he says how dare you be compassionate and forgiving to somebody who has been a spendthrift and a womanizer.

[29 : 39] How dare you welcome him back and reinstate him and treat him more lovingly than you treat me. The older brother simply could not grasp how deeply loving the father's heart was.

How the father was longing to welcome back the prodigal when eventually he came to himself and turned his footsteps homewards. And just think of how petty Jonah's anger became finally.

He was angry with God over that plant. What he cared about was not the destruction of 120,000 Ninevites. That didn't seem to bother him.

What he cared about was his own personal comfort. That plant was keeping the sun off his head. That's what he missed. So the Lord had to say to him you're concerned about that plant but I'm concerned about this great city.

You are concerned Jonah for your personal comfort but I'm concerned for the eternal souls of 120,000 people. Years ago I knew a young man down in London who appeared to make a start in the Christian life and he was part of a circle of friends and I was one of quite a number of friends down there.

[30 : 54] But this young man disappeared and we didn't see him for some time so I asked a mutual friend after him what's happened to Robert so and so and my friend said to me oh he bought a house and he turned his attention to curtains and carpets.

That was the end to his being effectively a Christian missionary and a worker. He turned his attention to his home comforts. Now friends we all need curtains we all need carpets I realize that and a roof over our heads we can't live in tents out on Glasgow Green we have to give some attention to housing ourselves and looking after those who depend upon us but Jonah 4 verses 10 and 11 show us our priorities if the plant that shades us from the sun is more important than the lost multitudes of the world then something has gone very wrong.

Now thirdly and this is I hope an encouraging implication from the book of Jonah Jonah was a duffer and yet the Lord used him.

I hope I'm not being too uncomplimentary to Jonah I thought of the word loser but that's a very rude word isn't it so I'm going to call him a duffer Jonah was a duffer and yet the Lord used him.

That's a golden strand that runs right the way through this book here is this man this believing man who runs from God runs from the great commission runs from his particular commission and yet he is still used by God and used mightily.

[32 : 32] He's mightily used on two different levels first to the people of Nineveh who repent and believe the message that he brings them and secondly Jonah is used to every person who reads this book including us and is greatly encouraged and spurred on by it.

So this is part of the book's message. God is not only compassionate to the Ninevites he's very compassionate to Jonah too the man who messes things up in a big way and yet the Lord reinstates him and uses him and is still using Jonah to this very day nearly 3,000 years later as Christians read this story and are spurred on by it.

God is so gracious he is so gracious to so many in the pages of scripture just think of others in the Bible who behave disgracefully or meanly or unbelievably think of Abraham and those terrible moments when he began to tell lies and so on think of Jacob the schemer the deceiver think of Jephthah and his foolish vow think of Samson David Solomon think of Simon Peter think of Saul of Tarsus which of those men was squeaky clean lifelong none of them so here is Jonah disobedient initially grumpy angry a runaway who still doesn't learn his lesson despite his three days in the belly of Sheol and yet the Lord treats him with astonishing grace and uses him mightily he even becomes a type or pattern of the Lord Jesus Jonah's experience becomes identified in Jesus' teaching with Jesus' own experience remember Jesus' words just as

Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish so the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth isn't it astonishing that Jesus should say as Jonah so me well the Lord is still in the business of mightily using duffers that is to say believers of dubious track record you sometimes look at your life and think this is a life of dubious track record you sometimes look at your life and say has there been any fruitfulness from my life at all well let's take great comfort from Jonah's story the God who dealt so graciously with Jonah and used him so abundantly much more than he could have known or understood he is our God and he has not changed he is still in the business of making the lives of duffers very fruitful let's pray together God our father we thank you so much for having mercy upon this man who initially ran from you and wanted to have nothing to do with your commission given to him we thank you for so graciously stopping him in his tracks bringing him back onto the right course and even when he continued to be cross and not seeing the full picture at all you still had mercy upon him until eventually he learned the lesson and has passed on that great question of the final verse of the book to us so dear father please have mercy upon us because in so many ways we're like Jonah and please deepen in our hearts the capacity to pity to have compassion upon

[36 : 32] Nineveh that great city and its modern counterparts in which there are so many people who spiritually and morally don't know where they are and we pray that you'll continue to stir us up and send us out as bearers of wonderful good news to them we ask it in Jesus name amen