

IT'S PEOPLE THAT MATTER TO GOD

JONAH 3:10 - 4:11

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.

So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"

Then the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry,

even to death!" But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than 120,000 persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left (in other words, children who still haven't learned to distinguish their right from left) - **and much livestock?"**

Jonah cared more about a miserable plant than he did the people of Nineveh - even its 120,000 children.

Let me share a news story that parallels what we just read... This October the US Supreme Court announced they'll hear a lawsuit filed by the state of Florida to restrict the state of Georgia's water rights.

Over five million people now live in metro Atlanta.

Our water comes from the Chattahoochee River and Lake Lanier. Those bodies of water also feed the Apalachicola River in northern Florida, between Panama City and Tallahassee. Even though the Corp of Engineers releases 3.2 billion gallons of water everyday from Lake Lanier, Florida thinks we're holding back too much. *They need to protect their mussels.*

A mussel is a simple animal - not much more than a ligament connecting two shells. It has gills, a digestive track, and a foot - *mussels don't even have muscles!*

And certainly, unlike human beings mussels lack a spiritual soul. When an mussel dies it just ceases to exist. There is no such thing as *a mussel heaven.*

Well, two species of Floridian mussels live and thrive on the banks of the Apalachicola River - both appear on the government's endangered species list. And the health of the mussels depends on the water levels in the River. *Thus, the water war between the states...*

Florida wants us to release more water to help their mussels. Georgia has 5 million thirsty Atlantans that can't survive without water. *What's to be done?*

*What comes first, **people or mussels?***

Well, the state of Georgia has the Bible on its side. The Creator made men and women after His own image, and then He gave them dominion over nature. We're caretakers of the environment - not its slaves.

Humans that live forever are far more important than the mussels that live in the Apalachicola River!

This is the message in Jonah 4. As far as God is concerned **an eternal soul** is infinitely more valuable than **a thing**. **People are of greater worth than plants. Men and women are more significant than mussels.**

After Jonah's expulsion from the fish, God spoke to Jonah again, and this time he obeyed. He answered God's call to travel to Nineveh and warn the city of a coming judgment. The people, even the king, repented.

A great revival broke out. The largest city in the world turned to the one, true God. The Lord spared Nineveh.

The last verse in Chapter 3 tells us, **"Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented**

from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.”

At the end of chapter 3 everyone is happy!

Heaven is happy. Angels are happy. God is happy. The citizens of Nineveh are happy. The king of Nineveh is happy. Even the livestock in Nineveh are happy.

They can finally lose the sackcloth and eat again.

Remember, in Luke 15:10 Jesus said, “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” It takes just one person to admit their sin and turn to the Savior, for all heaven to throw a party.

Well, imagine the celebration that went down in heaven when a whole metropolis repented. At the end of Chapter 3 everyone is rejoicing *with one exception...*

Chapter 4:1, “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.” When God called Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh his movement was different - he ran *with God*, not *from God*. But though his movement changed, his motivation was the same.

Jonah still hated Ninevites... When he talked of God’s coming judgment on Nineveh he did it with a smile on his face. He relished the thought. He chuckled as he warned. It’s as if he was saying, “Yet 40 days *and I can’t wait until Nineveh shall be overthrown.*”

Jonah thought the Hebrews were the only people entitled to know God. In fact, he’d rather die, than share God with Gentiles as notorious as the Assyrians.

How would you like to have a pastor like Jonah? A pastor you knew hated you and despised the fact God saved you? A preacher who stayed away from you because he expected that at any moment fire from heaven would fall on your head. *That's how he prayed!*

Well, that's the kind of preacher God sent Nineveh, yet remarkably mighty things occurred. The Assyrians were saved *more despite Jonah than because of him.*

This is why Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:41, "The men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here." Nineveh believed a man who hated them, while the Pharisees rejected Jesus, a man who loved them enough to die in their place.

And as Jesus said, these Ninevites will be called to testify against the Pharisees in the day of judgment.

Evidently, Jonah couldn't turn loose of *his past* or *his prejudice*. When Jonah preached he obeyed in *action*, but not in *attitude*. Jonah was like the out-of-control school boy who was running around in the classroom.

His frustrated teacher made him sit in the corner. Later he told a friend. "I may've been sitting on the outside, but I was still running around on the inside."

And this was Jonah. *His feet* might've obeyed God, but *his heart* was in still in rebellion to God's will.

Jonah went to Nineveh and preached... *but he was upset with the results.* Jonah had been waiting for fire to fall. He was angry that God chose to show mercy.

Realize, Jonah hated Assyrians for all the right reasons. Their crimes were savage. They preyed on the innocent. Nineveh deserved justice not mercy...

In Jonah's mind, it was okay for God to be merciful to him, *but how could God be merciful to Ninevites?*

And this is the mistake we make at times. We're happy to be the miracle case - the trophy of God's grace - but then we pick out a person or people, and say it can't happen for them? *They're too far gone.*

They're not worthy to be saved, *as if anyone is worthy to be saved.* Jonah didn't realize that God is "rich in mercy," and eager to extend it to anyone who repents!

Verse 2, "So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country?" This is why Jonah didn't want to go in the first place. This is what he feared would happen.

Some people accuse Jonah of not knowing God, *but the opposite was true.* Jonah's problem was that he *did* know God. He knew Him very well. He knew the width and breadth of God's love. How eager God is to save.

There's a hymn with these lyrics, "There is a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea."

Not even the boundaries of the sea are broad enough to take in God's mercy. To realize how encompassing are the

mercies of God you have to go to the cross and see Jesus' outstretched arms. That's how wide His mercies are! Every sin and every sinner are taken into account within His outstretched arms!

Jonah knew God was so kind and gracious if the Ninevites showed a mere inkling of repentance and faith God would jump at the chance to save them...

He says, "Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm." This is how God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 34. Usually, Exodus 34 is read as *a praise*, but Jonah quotes it as *a complaint*.

"I knew this would happen. Assyria deserves to fry in hell, but God is so gracious, and merciful - give Him half-a-chance, and He'll mess everything up and show forgiveness!" This is why he tried escaping to Tarshish.

Realize, prejudice made Jonah one sick pup. Instead of *rejoicing*, he became *resentful*. Racism can make a person irrational. A bigot makes dumb statements.

In fact, Jonah is so bummed out he wants to die. He says, "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"

Jonah is a Jew, and God's Law forbids suicide. In fact, suicide is the ultimate selfishness. All the person pulling the trigger thinks about is his or her own pain, not his loved ones who have to navigate the results...

Jonah could never commit suicide so he *asks God to take his life*. The prophet is so proud in the stance he's taken - so stubborn in his bigotry toward Ninevites - he would rather die than be wrong and show mercy.

I know people like Jonah. They're so eaten up with pride and prejudice - that even when confronted with the truth, they refuse to admit the error of their ways.

What happens next is so wise. Verse 4 tells us, **"Then the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"**

Notice, God doesn't confront Jonah with a stern rebuke. He doesn't engage the prejudiced person in an argument, or a shouting match. God is patient, and gentle, and kind. He appeals to the Prophet's sense of right and wrong... **"Is it right for you to be angry?"**

God loves to ask questions. This is how he humbled Job. He asked him a series of questions he couldn't answer. God loves to stir our thinking with questions.

Here He asks Jonah, **"Is it right for you to be angry?"** But Jonah refuses to answer. He has no response. He pleads **the Fifth. He doesn't answer on the grounds it might incriminate him.** Jonah isn't interested in discerning right from wrong. *He's just into Jonah.*

Which leads to Jonah's actions in verse 5, **"So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city."**

Jonah hasn't given up his prejudice. He's still hoping God will rain fire down on Nineveh, like He did on Sodom - send

the city up in smoke. That's why Jonah keeps his distance. He climbs a hill east of the city.

Of course, the summer heat in Mosul, Iraq can reach 125-130 degrees, so Jonah builds a lean-to with an awning, that'll provide him shelter from the blistering sun. In essence, Jonah builds a luxury box, and settles in to watch God torch Nineveh with some fireworks.

Even after the greatest spiritual awakening of all time, Jonah still believes God will torch Nineveh.

Realize, this is how NASCAR and Indy car drivers deal with the death of a fellow motorist. They just refuse to think about it. Officials encourage the denial.

On the day of a fatal accident at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, as soon as the track closes a crew heads out to paint over the spot where the car hit the wall. If you return to visit the site of the accident you won't be able to pinpoint its exact location.

Of the forty times drivers have died as a result of accidents at Indianapolis not once has the driver been pronounced dead at the track. That pronouncement is always made elsewhere. Indy officials make sure no one ever officially dies at their beloved Speedway.

Visit the Indianapolis Motor Speedway's Museum, which is located inside the 2½ mile oval - and you'll find no mention of the drivers who've lost their lives there... *In short, to continue the dangerous sport of auto racing it's best to deny that accidents even occur.*

And this is what it takes to continue in a prejudice...

Jonah hated Nineveh. He believed they were beyond redemption, so he denied all the evidence that contradicted his belief... *This revival never happened.*

Nineveh didn't really repent, and God couldn't relent.

Jonah's bigotry blocks out all the evidence, and he retreats into his own little world to wait for judgment.

Always remember **"Denial" is not just a river in Egypt.**

You can build your own false reality with planks of prejudice. Jonah's bigotry had denied the truth.

And a loving and merciful God is about to *worm His way* through Jonah's denial to break into his isolation.

The story of Jonah reminds me of the wise way Jesus dealt with the bias of the Jews. Jesus engaged them *not with confrontation, but with an illustration.*

He told the story of two sons... The younger brother asked his father for his inheritance; then wasted it on *wild living* and *loose women*. The boy ended up as low as Jew can go - he took a job *slopping hogs*.

That's when Jesus says the boy **"came to himself."** It dawned on him. He realized his father handled his servants - his hired-hands - better than he was being treated. So the son humbled himself, and return to his father, and beg for mercy - *a job back on the ranch.*

But when the son returned home the Father saw him at a distance, ran to greet him, fell on his neck, kissed him, showed compassion. The dad forgave his son, clothed him in his finest clothes, he even killed the fatted calf, and ordered a feast to celebrate his return.

Everyone was happy when the prodigal son returned, except... *the older brother*... As a side note there was one other person who wasn't really happy with what went down? Any guesses? *The fatted calf*

The calf's last words were, "*Eat Mor Chikin.*"

When people remember the parable of the Prodigal Son they usually forget there were *two sons* ... Jesus though, emphasized *the reaction of the older brother*.

When mercy was shown toward his kid brother, "*He was angry and would not go in. Therefore his Father came out and pleaded with him.*" *Sounds like Jonah...*

After Nineveh repented Jonah should've gone into the city and started a Bible study, *a holy party*, to teach the people about the one, true God and their newfound faith. Instead, Jonah camps outside on the east-side of the city. Jonah also got angry and "*would not go in.*"

In Jesus' parable the Father has to leave the party to reason with his son. And this is what God does with Jonah. He leaves the celebration inside the repentant city to reason with a stubborn Jonah. And God is going to speak to the prophet in a powerful, yet personal way.

Verse 6, "*And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.*" Notice this is the first time in the story of Jonah that we're told he was "*grateful.*"

He wasn't grateful *for the fish that kept him from drowning - or for getting upchucked onto the beach - or for being given a second chance to follow God's will - or for even the revival that occurred in Nineveh.*

He's not grateful until God provides him some shade. What do you expect with *a shady fellow* like Jonah?

Here God works another miracle - it's a miracle-grow plant. Overnight in the desert heat and dryness, God causes a palm plant to grow up and shelter Jonah.

The date palms in the Tigris valley grow 8-10 feet high, with large, elephant ear leaves and tender stalks. The plant is common in Palestine, India, and in parts of Africa. In fact, the palm is the symbol on Iraqi coins.

Here God prepared Jonah some *supernatural shade*. Overnight, a leafy palm grew eight to ten feet, and served the pouting prophet like a beach umbrella. The palm was God's merciful relief from the heat of the sun.

Jonah may've interpreted this unexpected blessing as a prelude for what he'd been waiting on. It was almost show time - fire and brimstone are ready to fall.

Verse 7 **“But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered.”** Every gardener knows this can happen.

Worms eat away the leaves, and can defoliate an entire plant. Often they burrow their way into the plant where they leave behind their fecal pellets. Turn a worm loose in your garden, and it can destroy a plant.

This is what happened to Jonah's precious palm.

Notice, the *plant grew overnight* - then the *plant died overnight*. In short, *God gives and God takes away*.

“And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” For a second time Jonah pleads for God to kill him. This man had such a grim outlook on life.

Rather than endure a difficulty his first reaction is to check out. His life has become too miserable to bear.

Twenty-four hours earlier Jonah was surprised by the plant. It was God’s gift. He was “*grateful.*” But now a day later, he believes he was deserving of the shade - and now he’s upset, God had no right to take it away.

The sun is now beating down on him... The wind is now chapping his skin... But that’s not all that’s making Jonah miserable... Bitterness is the heaviest burden a person can carry. It’s been said, “No matter how long you nurse a grudge it never gets any better.” You don’t heal a grudge by nursing it - but by forgiving its cause.

In verse 9 God again asks Jonah a question. It’s similar to the one He posed in verse 4, “Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “It is right for me to be angry, even to death!” This Jonah is so stubborn! He thought he deserved the plant God sent and the shade it provided.

Jonah came to Nineveh hoping to see the city burn with fire. Instead he’s burning up under the hot sun.

Once again, he asks God to just take his life.

When you study Jonah one truth you realize is that no one is too messed up to be used by God. *Bitter, angry, depressed, arrogant...* imagine, a prophet with a death-wish. Jonah was not the ideal candidate to send to Nineveh. This fellow had some very real hang-ups.

Jonah wants Nineveh to *fry*, or he'd just as soon *die*.

Yet to the end, God is patient with Jonah. God loved His reluctant prophet as much as He loved the wicked Ninevites. God wants to help Jonah grasp His grace.

Today's society takes a hard stance against racial prejudice, *as we rightly should*. There is no sympathy for the news anchor or television host who uses a racial slur. Even in those cases where there was no malice - *the person got caught up in a conversation and sent out an ill-advised tweet - or the statement was made in a different context than it's now being framed*.

It just seems our society has *only so much empathy*, and it's all reserved for the victim, not the perpetrator.

But God does something that's unheard of in our politically correct world. He not only has love for the victims of this hate crime - the Ninevites. He even has compassion on the perpetrator of the bigotry - Jonah.

God wants to rehabilitate his prejudiced prophet.

God speaks to him again in verse 10, **"The LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a**

night.” Even after receiving grace from God, Jonah treated it as if it were a blessing to which he was entitled. Jonah didn’t *buy the plant, pot the plant, water the plant, prune the plant...*

The palm only lived 24 hours, but in that short time it became *His* palm. How dare God mess with *His palm*.

Jonah never grasped the concept of God’s grace.

The blessings God sends our way aren’t paid for by our worthiness, they’re free gifts. *They’re on the house*.

It’s interesting that some people, like Jonah, in the absence of human relationships, get attached to plants or animals. For some folks it’s ferns and flowers. For other’s it’s a pet. For still other’s it’s a hobby or career.

People can use a flower bed, or a pet, or a pursuit as an emotional substitute for a flesh and blood person.

My former, next door neighbor was an older lady who literally lived for her plants and flowers. She complained whenever my boys walked through her yard. She told me they matted down her grass.

She made an enemy of every kid on the block because she was so protective of her silly yard. It’s sad when grass becomes more important than people.

Our family would’ve adopted this lady as a second grandma, but she never let us get close. She made it clear her *rhododendrons* were more valuable to her than any *relationship she might have with any of us*.

Like Jonah, she forgot what matters in life...

Recall I Peter 1:23, “The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

Don't every let a **thing** become more valuable than a **person**. Only two earthly items will live forever... the Bible - and the souls of men, women, boys, and girls...

It's your neighbor that will go to heaven or hell. Your petunias turn back to dirt. People should be our priority.

Perhaps you spend all day playing video games, or cross-stitch, or paint, or read, or tinker on cars, or hit golf balls - *or you're into some other hobby*. None of these activities are evil in and of themselves, as long as you don't use them as a way to escape people.

Yet you say, “*But I'm just not a people person.*” **Why aren't you?** If you're not a people person you're at odds with God. Only God takes priority over people!

God loves Ninevites, not palm trees. And just as Jonah was surrounded by Ninevites, so are you. Are you *a plant person, a pet person, or a people person?*

Don't waste your life, like Jonah, sitting in the shade of trivialities. Care about what concerns God. Serve and love people. Helping people is more difficult and a lot messier than tilling your garden, or even cleaning up after your dog, but in the end its far more rewarding!

Harmon Killebrew was a professional baseball player in the 1960s - a slugger for the Minnesota Twins.

When he was inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame Harmon told a story about his dad. The elder Killebrew always played pitch with his two boys in the front yard.

On occasion, Harmon's mom would complain about them wearing out the grass. His dad would always replied, "Honey, we're raising boys, not grass."

Mr. Killebrew knew what really matters in life.

Verse 11 concludes, "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than 120,000 persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left - and much livestock?" As I said at the beginning, the 120,000 persons unable to discern their left from their right were children - the Ninevite preschoolers.

And it's from this number that we calculate Nineveh's population. If there were 120,000 preschoolers there had to have been around a million-and-a-half people.

But here's God's point, like the Florida mussels in the River, Jonah cared more about a plant than the survival of a million-plus people, even the children.

Today, in Jerusalem, Palestinian panhandlers use kids, innocent children, to beg for money. The kids approach you with those sad eyes and beg you for help. They take the money back to their rich handlers.

But here God is trying the same approach on Jonah. He mentions the innocent children to squeeze Jonah's heart and try to ooze out a few drops of compassion.

"Come on Jonah, are you so prejudiced and hard-hearted that you don't even care about the children?"

Jonah pitied a plant that was literally, *here today and gone tomorrow*. Yet he got angry with God for showing compassion

on a million Ninevites that He created and loved deeply? The prophet's priorities were out of sync with the rhythm of God's heart and His love for people.

God wants to *forgive our sins*, and *heal our hurts*, and *mend our breaks*, and *open our eyes*, and *provide us rest*, and *restore our usefulness*. God created plants and animals, but it's people He loves and saves.

People matter to God, and if the salvation of Nineveh isn't proof enough - *look to the cross*. Jesus became a people, so He could die in the place of sinful people, *and not just Ninevites, but Snellvillites and Lilburnites!*

Don't be a *Jonah*, be a *Jesus!* Be a *giver*, not a *griper*. Help grow *people*, not just *pets or plants*. God cares for you, now you need to care for others!

Did God's efforts to change Jonah's heart work? What ultimately happened to Jonah? We don't know!

The book leaves us hanging... But I think that's the point, we walk away with a question that applies to our lives... *Do we care about the people God cares about?*

Or are we so wrapped up in our prejudices that we can't hear the voice of legitimate cries for help? Have we become immune to even the cries of the children?

Are we so busy *petting dogs* and *watering plants* that we don't have time for the people Jesus died to save?

In the end, Jonah's outcome remains a mystery.

We do know archeologists identified a mound near the ancient ruins of Nineveh, that the locals called, "[Nebi Yunas](#)" - or Arabic for "[the prophet Jonah](#)."

The mound was so venerated among the locals the Muslims built a mosque over the site, and refused to let it be explored. A whale bone even hung inside. The Arabs claimed it was the site of the tomb of Jonah.

We'd like to think Jonah laid down his prejudices and loved the Assyrians. He stayed there to help them grow in their faith. This is why the site was so respected.

Sadly, in 2014 ISIS fighters blew up the Tomb of Jonah. Though the Prophet is revered by Islam, Isis destroyed the tomb and the mosque that housed it as an assault on the role Jonah plays in Christianity.

ISIS understood that Jesus pointed to Jonah as a type of His death, burial, and resurrection. In Matthew 12, Jesus said, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." It was ISIS and Islam's hatred for Jesus and Christianity that caused the attack on Jonah's memory.

Let me wrap it up, by bringing you in on a little intrigue and espionage. *Did you know your pastor is also an international spy?* On our recent trip to Italy we visited the Vatican, and particularly the Sistine Chapel.

You're not suppose to take photographs of Michelangelo's famous ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, but I'm in there thinking who are these Catholics telling me, a Protestant pastor, what to do? I could take a photograph here that might help me teach the Bible to the good people at Calvary Chapel - *and so for the sake of my congregation I got a little rebellious!*

I took out my phone and held it down by my side. *In super-spy fashion*, I started snapping photos of the ceiling... *until I was caught by one of the Italian guards*, and sentenced to a flogging in the town square...

I'm joking about the flogging, but I did get rebuked and seriously frowned on. Yet before I was caught, look at the photo I snapped of Michelangelo's work... Here's the Prophet Jonah - *see the fish*... This is the official photo. It's clearer... *Mine was taken under duress*...

The entire ceiling is a masterpiece, *but all art critics say there's something unique about the portrayal of Jonah*. There's a brightness shining from his face.

Author Lloyd Ogilvie puts it, "[Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican portrays the prophets, apostles, and patriarchs. Of all the faces he painted, none has a more radiant countenance than Jonah.](#)" Ogilvie surmises, "[We wonder if Michelangelo knew something we do not know about what happened to Jonah after the sudden close of his biography.](#)"

The renaissance artist portrayed Jonah with a radiant face. As if he were a man set free from prejudice, and had fallen in love with God and his fellow man. *This is how I want to remember Jonah!*

It's nice to think Jonah overcame his prejudices and recognized the mercy and grace God had given him - then showed the Ninevites that same kindness.

Always remember, the book of Jonah is full of miracles: *the storm at sea, the great fish, the overnight plant, the hungry worm, the sudden east wind.*

But the greatest miracle is when God transforms a bigot into a big-hearted person. That's what we hope happened to Jonah... and we trust happens to us!