

An Expanding View of Forgiveness

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

Sunday, 8 October, 2023

Children's Talk: Jonah and the Fish

Running from the Lord

We are going to read a story about running away from the Lord. There was a man, named Jonah, who didn't want to do what the Lord told him to do. In fact, he wanted to do what the Lord told him so little that he tried to run as far away from the Lord as he could:

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.” ³But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:1-3)

What do you think happens? Is it possible to run away from the Lord? Is there anywhere that you can go that the Lord isn't there too? What do you think happens when someone tries to run from the Lord? Does it make them happier or sadder?

Things Go Badly

Things didn't go well for Jonah. Something that is important to remember is that things didn't go well for the people around Jonah either:

But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.

⁵ Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.

⁶ So the captain came to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.”

⁷ And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”

⁹ So he said to them, “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?” For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord,

because he had told them. ¹¹ Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?”—for the sea was growing more tempestuous.

¹² And he said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.” (Jonah 1:4-12)

What happened to Jonah? What might have happened if Jonah had stayed on the boat? Would that have been fair to the other people on the boat? When we don't do what the Lord tells us to do, what do you think that does to the people around us? Is this the end of Jonah? What do you think happens to him?

Returning to the Lord

Even though Jonah had tried to run away, the Lord still loved Jonah and wanted to rescue him. So to save him from drowning He sent a giant fish to swallow Jonah.

From inside the fish Jonah said a prayer to the Lord:

Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights
Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly. ² And he said:
I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction,
And He answered me.
Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
And You heard my voice...
So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.
(Jonah 1:17, 2:1-2, 10)

Do you think Jonah was sorry for running from the Lord? Do you think the Lord forgave Jonah? How do you know? Does the Lord ever stop trying to help someone?

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We're all familiar with the story of Jonah and the fish, how he fled from God's commands, was thrown into the sea to appease the storm, and spent three days in the belly of a fish before being spat up again on the shore. What we often miss is the broader context of this story: the fate of the city Nineveh and Jonah's role in that fate. Nineveh was a vast city, numbering over 120,000 inhabitants, not to mention its extensive wealth and livestock. In spite of this the Lord had slated Nineveh for destruction because of its evils, and had chosen Jonah as the one to declare this fate to the city. This is the commission that Jonah was fleeing when he was swallowed by the fish, and his reasons for fleeing return at the end of the story. In them we will find an important lesson for our own lives, a lesson that will help us see how we fall short of forgiveness and why we need to look to the Lord as our example.

We begin however not with Jonah but with the Lord. His interactions with the city of Nineveh at first seem to portray a God of vengeance but in actual fact illustrate the Lord's unending mercy and love. We join the story as Jonah enters and gives them the bad news and they react to it.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying,² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent.⁴ And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"⁵ So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.⁶ Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.⁷ And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water.⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry

mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

¹⁰Then 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. (Jonah 3:1-10)

What began then as a story of the Lord destroying those who are evil ends as an illustration of His forgiveness. Likewise this story contains an illustration of our own experiences when the Lord forgives us or those around us. The process is rather simple.

First, someone commits some evil or sin. It is not clear what sin the Ninevites had committed but it was grave enough that their city was headed for destruction. Yet the Lord did not simply destroy Nineveh: it was essential that before He did so He let them know where they stood with Him. This is an important aspect of the Lord's forgiveness. While we might at first think sending a prophet to proclaim doom is vindictive it is actually better than the alternative: destroying the city with no warning whatsoever. In His interactions with us the Lord does the same. When we realize that the Lord condemns some behavior that we or others are engaged in it can seem oppressive. But the Lord does not show us where we are headed out of pettiness. He does so to give us the chance to see for ourselves where we are and what we can do about it.

The wording of His warning is telling. He did not say, "Unless you repent, your city will be overthrown!" He simply stated it as a decided fact: the city will be destroyed. This is a useful reminder of how we experience the Lord's truth. When our actions or thoughts are condemned it can feel that we are doomed. How can we be rescued from such evils as lying, envy, cheating, pornography, laziness and so on? We can in fact overcome all of these evils (see Jeremiah 18:7-8), but the Lord

wants to bring our attention to how dire they are: if we continue down this path we will be dooming ourselves.

The power of this approach is that it elicits a true response. The people of Nineveh, from the least to the greatest, showed remorse over their evils and repented of them. They did so even not knowing if it would be enough to avert destruction (Jonah 3:9). They repented only because it was right, not because of some bargain they had with God. This too is why God does not present it as, "You'll end poorly if you don't stop" but instead bluntly says, based on where we are headed, "You'll end up poorly. Period." We often need this kind of blunt reminder. Evil is real. We have the freedom to choose it. Choosing evil is not light: it leads to hell. That is what is at stake. The end result is that God removed their impending destruction of Nineveh. Because of their wholehearted repentance He was able to save them from the fate that they themselves had brought on, and He does this for us as well. When we repent with our whole hearts, the fate that seemed certain, that we had resigned ourselves to, is taken away by the Lord. This is the form of His forgiveness and mercy: He gives us the warnings that we need to hear in order to change, and in changing are saved from the certain doom we had been heading for.

So far so good. But this story is not just about the Lord's forgiveness: it is about the Lord's forgiveness in contrast to our own point of view, as represented by Jonah. Remember how Jonah ran from the Lord in the beginning? Why did he do that? Was he lazy? Did he not trust God? The reasons come to the fore now. Jonah is not pleased with the Lord for saving Nineveh. In fact, he explicitly says that he ran away in the first place because he thought this might happen: in warning Nineveh he has saved in, and in his mind Nineveh did not deserve salvation in the slightest. From a distance Jonah seems petty, but we do the same. Have you ever been angry

at someone, especially someone you don't have a high opinion of? It's almost fun to stew in resentment towards them. And then against all odds, without having to say anything, the person genuinely apologizes and acknowledges that they were in the wrong? That is so annoying! Why is that? We actually like thinking poorly of other people. It lets us look down on them and lift ourselves up to the moral high ground. When they then unexpectedly take the high ground it robs us of our righteous indignation. We have to give up resenting them and forgive. That's pretty close to where Jonah was. He wanted to be able to hate Nineveh, not help them become better people!

The Lord then taught Jonah, and us, a lesson that can give us the right perspective on forgiveness.

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

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. 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. ⁷ But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. ⁸ 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."

⁹ 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!"

¹⁰ But the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not laboured, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?" (Jonah 4:4-11)

The contrast the Lord presents here is stark: if Jonah can be so upset about the death of a plant, how much more should the Lord be upset about the death of an entire city? Especially given that Jonah put no effort whatsoever into the plant, whereas the Lord created the entire city, with all 120,000 inhabitants, for a purpose. Here is the heart of the matter: the Lord does not take delight (as we might) when

someone gets stuck in his evil and suffers the natural consequences. As He says it the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord has no joy in the death of one who dies (Ezekiel 18:23, 32). The Lord's goal is never to punish, it is always to help people improve, *no matter what they have done*.

Consider the Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). That last line is especially relevant: pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. When people do you wrong, pray that they see the error of their ways! Hope to the Lord that they can become better people! Maybe even help them in whatever way you can. Again, it does not make the Lord happy when people experience the negative consequence of their actions. He wants to help people avoid that. This attitude is what makes up a large portion of His forgiveness. This is clarified in a passage from the teachings of the New Church:

"And now forgive, I beg you, my sin only this once" means an appeal to them to disregard the disobedience. This is clear from the meaning of "forgiving" as disregarding, for forgiving is regarding someone not from the point of view of evil but good; and from the meaning of "sin" as disobedience. (*Secrets of Heaven* §7697)

When we view people from the point of view of evil we are like Jonah: we take delight when we see them get what's coming to them and are annoyed when they are better people than we thought they were. But when we see people from the point of view of the good potential that they have we are like the Lord: clear when they do wrong, yes, but only so that we can help them improve and live happier lives. We have only truly forgiven someone when we can acknowledge that as our hope: not that they suffer for their evils but that the Lord leads them to become good.

The lesson we can take away from the story of Jonah is a shift in our take on what forgiveness looks like. The Lord's goal in forgiving is always to help people, which is why His forgiveness extends so much more broadly than ours. If we accept the Lord's view forgiveness is not something that people have to earn: it is about seeing the potential in people and trying to foster that, no matter who they are or what they have done. That is true forgiveness. *Amen.*