



The Jonah in Us

SERIES: *Jonah*

I went to Las Vegas this past weekend to perform a wedding. As I got off the plane, I was hit with the smell of cigarette smoke, the clanging of slot machines, beautiful women not wearing much, flashy billboards, and the frenzy of March Madness on the TV's in the bars. For 24 hours of being in Las Vegas, I was reminded of and experienced the battle going on inside me. As followers of Jesus we have two options: One, we can walk in dependence on God and live out of the overflow of who He is, or two, we can walk in dependence on ourselves and live out of the overflow of who we are.

The Bible calls this the battle between the Flesh and the Spirit. We have the Holy Spirit living in our lives. It desires to live for God and to do right and we have the flesh who longs for the things of this world. If you've been a Christian for any amount of time you can relate to this battle within.

"For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" (Gal. 5:17).

As we come to Jonah chapter 4, we find him smack dab in the middle of the battle between the flesh and the Spirit of God. Let's recap Jonah:

Chapter 1: You can't run from God, and when you do, He pursues you!

Chapter 2: What do you do when you are in the belly of a fish? Pray!

Chapter 3: God loves obedience because it shows we love and trust Him!

As we come to chapter four, what do we expect from Jonah? We would expect him to be rejoicing in God's mighty work and celebrate with God's people. It would be the start of discipleship and Jonah would be praising and thanking God. In fact, if the book of Jonah ended at chapter 3, Jonah would be regarded probably as one of the greatest prophets to ever live!

But there are four warning signs that we are living in the flesh and losing the battle within.

Warning Sign #1: Self-Centered Praying.

"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And 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 are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live'" (4:1-3).

Jonah only prays twice in these chapters. His first prayer in chapter 2 was one of humility, repentance, surrender, and change. His second prayer is much different. I want you to notice something about Jonah's prayer. I want you to circle and count each time Jonah uses the word "I" and "my." In the original Hebrew language I counted nine times!

"And 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 are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live'" (vv.2-3).

Notice in verse 2: "Is this not what I said?" Jonah is telling God what to do! This is not the new Jonah; this is the Jonah losing the battle with his flesh. This is the Jonah beginning to depend on himself and live out of the overflow of who he is.

Warning Sign #1 that we are losing the battle within and living in the flesh is when our prayers become self-centered.

"Jonah prayed his best prayer in the worst place, the belly of a fish, and he prayed his worst prayer in the best place, at Nineveh where God was working." --Wiersbe

When things are going good in life, don't you find it hard to pray? When life is wonderful, it is easy to forget about God. But, when things are going bad and when we are stressed, we become really dependent on God. We have to be careful and listen to ourselves pray. If we hear a lot of "I", "me", and "my", it should be a warning sign that something is not right.

Does God care about our own problems and needs? Absolutely. Should we be honest with God and just tell him all that is on our hearts and minds? Absolutely! But if our prayers are constantly filled with our needs and issues, we are getting off track. So monitor your prayers this week.

And when our prayers become self-centered and self-serving, there is another warning sign about our life that we need to pay attention to.

Warning Sign #2: Self-Focused Living.

"And the LORD said, 'Do you do well to be angry?' Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live'" (4:4-8).

What I want you to notice here is that Jonah makes three critical mistakes in verse 5 and shows how self-focused his life had become.

1. Jonah quits. "Jonah went out of the city." Why in the world did Jonah leave the city? God didn't tell him to leave. Jonah abandons his mission! I think that Jonah preaches his short sermon, begins to see change, doesn't like it, and leaves the city as quickly as he could. Have you ever quit something because you didn't like the results?

2. Jonah builds a shelter. What's wrong with that? Instead of staying in Nineveh and being a part of the revival, Jonah makes his own little retreat outside the city walls. This is Jonah in control again!

3. Jonah becomes a spectator. He sits in the shade of the shelter with a coke and bag of popcorn hoping to have ringside seats when God obliterates Nineveh. Are you a

spectator? Maybe you've been coming to CPC for years, but you haven't made the transition from the sidelines to the playing field. It's like the definition of football: 22 players who are in desperate need of rest and 50,000 fans who are in desperate need of exercise!

God responds to Jonah's self-focused life with three object lessons about His mercy:

1. He appoints a plant (v.6). A plant quickly grows and gives Jonah some nice shade. Jonah was happy as a clam! God was finally taking care of him once again. He wasn't happy about his mission, about the storm, about the fish, about Nineveh's repentance, but he is happy about a plant! Jonah was completely self-focused and self-absorbed. "It's all about me!"

2. He appoints a worm (v.7). The worm attacks the plant and kills it.

3. He appoints a scorching wind (v.8). Jonah is so miserable and hot by this point he wants to die!

Why does God do this to Jonah? God uses a plant, a worm and a hot wind to break Jonah down to get him to listen and to refocus. He did the same thing with keeping Jonah in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

"By exposing Jonah to a series of overwhelming experiences, God conditions the prophet to a point where he can hear the question afresh and is given the opportunity to use his own self-centeredness as a window upon the very heart of God."

--Boice

Before the plant, worm, and intense wind, Jonah was completely self-focused and self-absorbed. The Christian life is a gradual process of losing interest in ourselves, our comforts, our wants, and our dreams, and becoming more and more interested in the God who lives in me. God loves to use plants, worms, and intense wind to chisel away the selfishness in our hearts. He uses these things to teach us a lesson. Has God ever had to teach you a lesson?

We need to learn how to thank God for the plants, worms, and scorching wind in our lives because He uses them to mature and develop us into the people He has called us to be.

Have you ever noticed that when our prayers are self-centered and our lives become self-focused, that when things don't go as planned, anger begins to build up. Anger builds up because we are losing control. God isn't acting the way we want him to. Life seems to be getting hard and we then get angry at God...that's exactly what happens to Jonah.

Warning Sign #3: Self-Destructive Anger.

“But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you do well to be angry for the plant?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die’” (4:9).

All throughout Scripture, fighting with God and being angry with him is a time-honored biblical practice: Moses, Job, David, St. Peter, were all pros at it. Anger is a natural emotion and if handled correctly can be good for us. We should get angry about injustice and oppression. We should get angry about sin. Remember what Jesus did when he saw money changers and the flea market set-up in the courts of the temple? He got angry!

The Bible never says that anger is sinful; it is how we handle and deal with anger that leads to sin. Anger tells us something. Anger tells us that something is wrong; it tells us that something isn't working right; it carries with it conviction; it shows what we really care about.

What anger fails to do though is tell us whether the wrong is outside or inside us.

Jonah's problem was not what was happening in Nineveh, his problem was his heart. Jonah's theology never got from his head to his heart! Jonah's heart was filled with self-destructive anger, which left him bitter and resentful at God's mercy. Jonah was losing the battle within and was self-destructing, begging to die, right before our eyes.

Jonah is angry with God for a whole bunch of reasons. God didn't behave the way he expected. God's behavior does not conform to Jonah's theology. Jonah was surprised by grace; he didn't know God as good as he thought he did. He couldn't stomach the fact that God's mercy was being offered to all. “Over my dead body” is Jonah's reaction to God grace and he was angry enough to die! Nineveh repenting was bad for Jonah's reputation. Israel hated the Assyrians. Jonah told them God was going to wipe them out. Now a revival is taking place, no expected it, and Jonah feels like a fool! His reputation was on the line.

Self-destructive anger was feeding Jonah's ego and producing the poison of selfishness in his heart. Jonah no longer has any compassion for those far from God.

Warning Sign #4: Self-Seeking Compassion.

“And the LORD said, ‘You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do

not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?’” (4:10–11).

God breaks him down to the point where he wanted to die and reminds Jonah that his compassion for a plant pales in comparison to God's compassion for the city of Nineveh. Think about it. Jonah cares more for a plant than for 120,000 children who don't know God.

“Jonah needed Nineveh as much as Nineveh needed Jonah”
--Warren Wiersbe

The point here is that God has compassion for lost sinners and His servants must also have compassion. The book of Jonah ends very abruptly and we are left with the same question Jonah was left with: Do we really love the lost?

How does Jonah respond? We don't know. How will we respond?

We had a baptism at our Easter service recently. There was a man who was baptized and after the baptism, I saw him off on his own, weeping and weeping, grateful for God's mercy and forgiveness. I've been thinking about this person's response all week and I was reminded of God's great compassion and mercy for people like me. I've been thinking about my own life this week and wondering how much I care about people who are far from God. This person is new believer, a baby in Christ, and his response fueled my passion for lost people even more. God looked at Nineveh and wept, Jesus looked at Jerusalem and wept. What is my response when I look at the cities here on the Peninsula?

Go back to when I was in Las Vegas last weekend. I was glad to get back home. What I realized though is that for whatever reason, the compassion I once had for the lost in Las Vegas had significantly decreased. It was a good measure for me and it made me wonder if I was losing the battle in this area.

There is a battle going on within us, there is a Jonah in us all that wants to live solely for our own good and forget about those who are lost and far from God. There is a Jonah in us all looking for every chance to come out and rear his ugly head.

“A Jonah lurks in every Christian heart, whimpering his insidious message of smug prejudice, empty traditionalism, and exclusive solidarity.” --Allen

CONCLUSION

Every Christian has two choices: We can walk in dependence on God and live out of the overflow of who He

is, or we can walk in dependence on ourselves and live out of the overflow of who we are.

I think we'd all agree that living in the Spirit is the life we want. The problem is, you and I live in the flesh more than we'd like to admit. What do we do? How do we fight and win the battle going on in us all?

First, we must look for the warning signs that we are walking in the flesh:

Warning Sign #1 that we are losing the battle within and living in the flesh is when our prayers become self-centered.

Warning Sign #2 is that we are becoming more and more self-focused in our lives. Our time, talent, and treasure are being used to serve ourselves.

Warning Sign #3 is that we begin to see the fruit of self-destructive anger in our lives. It begins when we are first angry with God. Next we get angry about circumstances. Then we get angry with all sorts of minor things. The anger becomes self-destructive.

Warning Sign #4 is self-seeking compassion. When we become more concerned about God having compassion and mercy on us that we really don't care about others who are far from God.

Second, we must walk by the Spirit. **"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh"** (Gal. 5:16). Surrendering our lives to God and walking in the Spirit is a day in, day out, minute-by-minute action.

For Jonah, yesterday's grace is not sufficient for today's battle! Jonah went from a changed man who cried out to God in the belly of a fish to a backslidden and resentful person. We must learn to walk in dependence on God and live out of the overflow of who He is—intimacy with God.

What does intimacy with God look like? It's time spent with Him in His Word, in prayer, in spiritual disciplines. It's a process of leaning on God, depending on Him and living out of the overflow of who He is.

There were some missionaries who went to a village who never heard of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To do so, they had to first meet with the chief. The chief told them that he wanted to read the Bible first. He told the missionaries to come back in a few months and he would give them his decision. When the missionaries returned not only had the chief become a believer, but he led the entire village to Christ. The missionaries asked the chief to describe in his own words what it is like to follow Christ. The chief said, "It is like there are two dogs inside me, a good dog that wants to do right and holy things, but there is a bad dog that desires to do wrong things, hurtful things. It feels like these two dogs are inside of me constantly fighting." The missionaries asked which dog wins the fight? The chief answered, "The one I feed the most."

There are a million ways everyday to feed the flesh. Only through intimacy with God will we win the battle with the flesh.

Who are you feeding more? The flesh or the Spirit of God?