

“A Convicting Compassion:
Jonah and the Journey Outward” (Part 8)
Matthew 23:13-32 ; Jonah 4:1-11; Psalm 131:1-3

Introduction

Friday was the 50th anniversary of Exploding Whale Day. Yes: Exploding Whale Day! 50 years ago a massive sperm whale carcass washed up on the beach in Oregon, on the West Coast of the US. It had happened before, but it had happened so long ago that no one could remember what they did to get rid of a whale carcass. So the highway department came to the obvious conclusion: they decided to use explosives and blow the whale to bits, allowing seagulls and crabs to eat the leftovers.

It worked. Kind of. Because, as the TV reporters put it, “the blast blasted blubber beyond all believable bounds.” A chunk of blubber crushed a car several hundred meters away. Tiny bits of blubber rained down on spectators. And a whale of a lot of whale was still stuck on the beach. Not to mention the *smell*.

Seagulls, spectators, and reporters all went away, and the highway department was left alone to do the dirty work, cleaning the mess off the beach and the dunes.

The Blast Site: Jonah 4

These final verses of Jonah are a kind of blast site. Full of debris. Jonah’s heart has exploded with anger. The nastiness of it is all over, and it leaves an awful smell. It would have been so much cleaner if the story ended before this scene. But now we have to clean up the mess. Just like the highway department had a lot of time to think about what just happened as they cleared the beach, the author wants to let us canvas the blast site of Jonah’s heart—to really consider what has happened here.

And when we are exposed to Jonah’s heart like this, we naturally wonder why God picked him to be his ambassador to Nineveh. Did God not *know* what he was getting when he picked Jonah?

At first it seems like chapters 1 and 2 are the intensive divine therapy that will fix Jonah’s klunky heart. The crazy experience will make Jonah whole-hearted so he can represent God’s heart in Nineveh. Was God *fooled* into thinking that after this wild incident on the Mediterranean—being tossed by the sea, thrown overboard, swallowed by a great fish, and spit up on the shore—that Jonah had really changed? That he was *ready*? Isn’t Jonah put through the ordeal of self-examination, repentance, restoration, renewal, and fresh obedience, so that he could whole-heartedly speak to Nineveh in God’s name?

The Riddle of the Human Heart

The end of this story, Sinclair Ferguson says, is an enigma, because *Jonah* is an enigma. But Jonah’s not alone. Saint Augustine says in his famous *Confessions*: “I have become a mystery, a

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great riddle, to myself.” Cognitive neuroscientists tell us that only 5% of our brain’s work—decisions, emotions, reactions, and behavior—is done *consciously!* We are literally unaware of 95% of what we’re thinking, feeling, and doing. We don’t know ourselves.

The book of Jonah is a riddle, because Jonah is a riddle, because the human heart is a riddle. Especially in our state of brokenness, the human heart is not just a mystery, but, apart from God’s grace, a pathetic, *tragic* riddle. The book of Jonah starts out with a storm on the sea, and the cargo and Jonah himself thrown overboard. The book ends with a storm in Jonah’s heart, and Jonah overthrown again, with his heart scattered on the sands of Assyria.

The Greek epic poet Homer asked: “What manner of speech has escaped the barrier of your teeth?” Homer was a contemporary of Jonah. If he had been standing there when Jonah gave this heart-exploding speech to God, he’d have said right to Jonah’s face: “What manner of speech has escaped the barrier of your teeth?” The Lord Jesus says that out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. The mission is over. Jonah, even against all his instincts and desires, has somehow succeeded in being the ambassador of God’s grace to Nineveh. God sent a Jonah who was not ready to love anyone, and who clearly doesn’t even value his own life beyond his superficial status, to demonstrate how much God valued Assyrian evildoers and Ninevite cows! It worked. Kind of. But now we’re left alone with God and Jonah’s heart.

Imagine Jonah had been invited into the divine counsel to help make a plan for what to do about the utter wickedness going on in the city of Nineveh, here is how he would have ranked his preferred strategies:

Jonah’s first choice: do not send a prophet to Nineveh; simply rain down hellfire on that worthless city.

Compromise plan: if we *must* send a prophet, send a prophet who can serve as a prosecuting lawyer, indicting Nineveh for their wickedness. Bring Nineveh to trial, present the evidence, convict them, and hand them their much-deserved death sentence.

Someone else in the divine counsel suggests sending a prophet in order to give Nineveh one last chance to repent. Jonah’s eyes and mouth bulge open. “If you send a prophet, *do NOT* give them a chance to repent. That’s not what a sovereign king would do!”

But ultimately the Lord is persuaded to do exactly this, and to send Jonah to be the voice of warning, calling Nineveh to repentance, and ultimately showing them grace. The sovereign Lord sends junk-hearted Jonah to reveal his heart to Nineveh.

Three years ago, when I submitted an application to be your senior pastor, I wondered whether I had the appropriate qualifications. But I figured it was up to you all to decide—not me. Let me ask you this, though. Let’s say that in my cover letter I said that I didn’t much care for people. That I especially disliked non-Americans. That I thought cities were cesspools of immorality.

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That I considered Europe fundamentally immoral and lost and beyond redemption. That I was really just hoping for a position of prestige and power. Do you think Peter Chen’s pastoral selection team would have said “before we put his application into the paper shredder, let’s hear a few of his sermons”?

The Pursuit of Jonah’s Heart

But as we’ve been saying, even though the book reveals God’s love for the lost Ninevites, it is even more focused on God’s love for lost Jonah. Even though the Lord calls for a total transformation of Assyrian society, this book is focused on the transformation of Jonah’s heart and life—a transformation which requires just as much of a miracle as the Ninevite repentance, a transformation that only God’s love could hope to accomplish.

So the Lord sends a cold-hearted mess of a man on his mission of warm-hearted compassion to this city, where 120,000 precious-in-his-sight lives matter to him deeply. And the more that we get to know Jonah, the dumber this idea seems to be. What *is* the Lord doing!?

After the surprising success of Jonah’s mission, Jonah leaves town. The Lord, in chapter 4, goes outside the city, finds Jonah sitting in a little booth, a shack he’s made to protect himself from the heat (5). And the Lord finds him waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh. At this point, Jonah is 95% sure that God will hear their repentance, see their intention to put away wickedness, and will cancel his plans to destroy the city. But he’s come all this way. So he’s going to plop down and see what happens.

Apparently there was an army explosives expert on the beach in Oregon that day 50 years ago. And he pleaded with the highway department not to use so much explosives. They ignored him, and just kept piling the TNT up next to the whale carcass. Imagine the explosive expert shaking his head, but standing back, behind the dunes, a lot further away than all the other observers, looking through his binoculars thinking “those idiots.” But also knowing that maybe there’s a 5% chance that their stupid plan will actually work. This is Jonah camped out, looking to see if maybe God isn’t such an idiot, and he’ll end up destroying Nineveh like he ought to do.

The Lord finds Jonah there, bitter, watching. This could have been an even more pyrotechnic book if it had ended with the Lord destroying the little shack Jonah is sitting in, and Jonah with it. The exact opposite of what Jonah wanted to happen to Nineveh. That would have been a rich irony!

But as one scholar says that the Lord has come as Jonah’s therapist, his counselor. Instead of pointing the finger at him, attacking his self-righteous attitude directly, the Lord is both patient and wise—the wonderful Counselor that he is. The counseling session begins with the Lord giving Jonah some extra shade: he appoints a vine (6) to grow on Jonah’s booth. Jonah is

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“exceedingly happy” (6) about this vine. The Lord appoints a worm to eat up the vine (7). He appoints a hot wind and a blazing sun (8). Now Jonah is suicidal again.

And at this point, the Lord gently asks some probing questions. “Jonah, you didn’t make this vine (10). It’s a *vine*. A plant. But you want to die because it falls apart? Now, I’ve made the world. The great city of Nineveh is full of my image-bearers. It’s full of cattle,

which I also happen to like. Don’t you think that if you’re so concerned about a plant, I should be a lot more concerned for the city of Nineveh?”

And then the book ends. How does Jonah respond? No idea.

Zack Eswine has pointed out that it’s not until the third year of Jesus’ public ministry that he starts to sound like a prophet, pronouncing all these woe to yous. The first two years, he was telling parables, painting these kinds of word pictures, telling people to consider the lilies and generally being super patient with people who did not know their right hand from their left. This is what the Lord is doing with Jonah. There will come a day when the Lord will judge self-righteous, bitter religious people like Jonah. But not until he’s been clever, patient, and very convicting in the way he pursues their explosive, angry hearts.

Jonah’s Non-Answer, and the Question Put to Us

The question: did Jonah get it? This question is left unanswered, because the question is turned on us, the readers, the people who bear God’s name in the world. Will we turn from our bitterness and anger and embrace the kindness of God? Or will we keep pointing the finger at everyone else but ourselves? In the end, the Lord doesn’t need us for his mission to the world. But he *wants* us. He wants us so bad that he has sent Jesus as his missionary to us, to call out our ugly hearts and our bitter deeds, but then to transform our hearts as we encounter his heart—poured out for us in the self-giving life and death of Jesus for us.

Jonah, these Ninevites are wicked, but they don’t know their right hand from their left hand. “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.”

What will your response be, when the Lord Jesus finds your wreck of a self-righteous heart and gently calls you to leave it behind and get a heart that is soft as his own?