

Jonah: Discovering God's Heart

DARRELL DELANEY

God is always trying to teach us something. What truly blesses me is the fact that God doesn't give up trying to help us understand his ways. Without this, we would be lost. Jonah experienced this, and even though he has difficulties because of his own anger with God, the Lord continues to work with Jonah. God helps Jonah to see his compassion exceeds Jonah's expectations, as they exceed ours. Today on *Groundwork*, we will see how we will be encouraged by a God who continues to work with imperfect people like Jonah. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are currently wrapping up the fourth act of this book, Jonah. We have seen how...in the first three chapters we have looked at...how God's character is, and how he can...as you quoted Dr. Neal Plantinga...God can hit straight lines with crooked sticks. That is something that we can thank God for, because, you know, Jonah's motives haven't always been as pure, and neither have ours; but our God...he has been faithful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Jonah is sort of a tough cookie and a tough character, as the writer Frederick Buechner once said...and I think that we may have mentioned this in the second program in this four-part series corresponding to the four chapters of Jonah...Jonah had a personality like curdled milk, you know, and Buechner even made the joke that, you know, even the fish couldn't keep Jonah down for long before he puked him out. The thing is, Darrell, if you were reading this book for the first time, and didn't know how it ended, the truth of the matter is, when God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh in Chapter 1, and Jonah instead goes to Tarshish and tries to run away from God, we actually don't know why. We really don't know why. He doesn't succeed, of course. God sends the storm and Jonah goes overboard, and then God resends him; but we don't really know why until now we get to Jonah Chapter 4, and just by way of reminder, the final verse in Jonah Chapter 3 was that God relented; the people of Nineveh from the king on down, and even the cows...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Everybody repented and put on sackcloth and ashes; and so, the final line of Jonah 3 is God relented. He did not send punishment upon the Ninevites—he did not destroy the city. That is the end of Jonah 3, and now we pick up Jonah 4.

DARRELL DELANEY

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Okay; and so, the penny drops. Now we know why he fled. He was afraid his work would be effective. He was afraid he would preach repentance and they would actually do it, and then God would not punish them; and to Jonah, that is not the outcome he wanted; and it is interesting here, Darrell...I mean, we have language from the book of Exodus, but also like from a lot of psalms, you know; and usually when you read this like in a psalm it is like being sung to a very beautiful...

DARRELL DELANEY

Of praise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes...O, Lord, you are a gracious and compassionate, God. You are slow to anger and abounding in love. You relent from sending calamity. Here, Jonah speaks these words with a sneer.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh...contempt.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is not happy about these characteristics of God, unless they apply to him, right? It was good for him when he was in the belly of the fish, you know, that saved him from drowning. Oh, it is so good that you are a gracious and compassionate God because you saved *me*; but now, because those same characteristics led you to save the Ninevites, I don't like that.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, I find that so ironic. Isn't it interesting how he loves and appreciates this mercy, and repents in the belly of the fish, and he is so thankful for this compassion and this relenting; but then, when it comes to the Ninevites, he has a problem with that; and God kind of blind-sides him right there and asks him a question. In verse 4 it says: But the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

I think this question...I am intrigued by God asking questions anyway because God never asks a question because he needs information, but he really asks the question so we can get a locus on where our heart is—where our motive is—and this question actually blindsides Jonah. I think we can get caught up, Scott, in our feelings and our emotions at times, when we don't even think to ask the question when we get upset. We think about what has been happening to us, or what entitlement or what justification we think we deserve; and this question stops Jonah in his tracks.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or it sure should. It reminds me, Darrell, when you observed that right now, something I read one time from the story in Genesis of the fall, and God, after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, and God comes and says: Adam, where are you?

DARRELL DELANEY

Where are you?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And somebody once said to a Rabbi: Why did God ask Adam where are you? Didn't God know where Adam was? And the Rabbi said: Oh, God knew where Adam was, it was Adam who didn't know where he was. And so also here, God is saying: Are you right to be angry? And you know, Darrell, I get angry sometimes. Most people get angry sometimes; and when you are angry, the last thing you want someone to say to you is: Are you right to be angry? Because it is like I am in no mood to admit that maybe my anger is misplaced...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jonah's anger is misplaced. He should not be angry about the salvation of these people, but he is because all along, Darrell, Jonah has been an encapsulation of all of Israel. Jonah was probably written after the exile to Babylon, and this was written to remind the people of why they went into exile in Babylon in the first place.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They had become so insulated, so isolated, so self-focused, they didn't care about the rest of the world. They didn't even care much about their own morality. Israel was a members-only club, and Jonah wanted it to stay that way. He didn't want the Ninevites to get in on the action. This is just for me; this is just for Israel. So, when God is slow to get angry toward me, good; slow to get angry toward anybody else, bad.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that is interesting that you talked about this exclusive club. That could go in a whole lot of different directions, but obviously Jonah and the people of Israel have forgotten their mandate to be a blessing to someone outside of themselves, which was given to Abram in Genesis 12: You shall go and be a blessing, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you, Abram, if you obey me. If you trust me, I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand in the desert. So, the fact that he misunderstands that and doesn't have that idea, and the fact that he is upset and thinks that he is rightfully justified shows how far away Jonah is; and juxtapose that to the faithfulness of the Ninevites, who didn't know God, who had no idea who God was until they heard the message of repentance, shows God's compassion on both parties, because he could have just wiped Jonah out and used someone else because of the so many times he ran away and disobeyed, but he gives Jonah another chance; and he also gives the Ninevites another chance, and that means that because God is sovereign, Jonah has zero right to become angry in this situation. He cannot decide who receives mercy from God. He cannot determine that, and neither can we. These things are a gift.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So there you have it; and now we know what was going on. Jonah, on the second go around, he goes to Nineveh: Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned; repent; repent. But all the while, Jonah is thinking to himself: Don't listen to me; please don't listen to me; please don't repent. So, he was hoping they wouldn't repent, so then he could watch God fry the city; but even when they did repent, he was still hoping God would say: Too late; too late; not good enough; not good enough. Except God doesn't. God says: Good enough; they have repented; I am not going to fry the city; and Jonah is upset, but there is an interesting...another opportunity to see some anger on Jonah's part as we continue into the fourth chapter, and we will take a look at that in just a minute; so, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, let's jump right back into Jonah Chapter 4. We saw in the first three verses Jonah is angry that the people were spared; verse 4, God comes to Jonah and says: Are you right to be angry? Jonah doesn't answer, but meanwhile we pick it up now at verse 5.

DARRELL DELANEY

Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." ⁹But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said, "and I am so angry I wish I were dead."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, Jonah. This is a problem child. It is interesting how often in this book, Darrell, we read what God provides.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, in Chapter 2, he provides the great fish...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again, the fish was Jonah's salvation. It kept him from drowning, and Jonah is happy about the fish because it kept him from drowning. Now, the Lord provides a leafy plant, and Jonah is happy about the plant because it keeps him shaded, you know; but then...there is some real humor going on here, too...then the Lord provides a worm, and then the Lord provides a scorching east wind; now this isn't so advantageous, it is still God's provision apparently, but now Jonah is angry, and for a second time in about five verses, God has to ask Jonah: Are you right to be angry? So, are you right to be angry that Nineveh didn't get fried? Are you right to be angry about the plant? Jonah didn't answer the first time, but now he does answer: Yes, I am. I liked that plant, and it is gone, so I would rather be dead. Wow! And of course, as we noted, the only reason Jonah had camped outside the city is to wait for the fireworks.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; it is interesting that he just wanted to see is the judgment going to come down, or are these people going to repent, and then God relents. He is definitely... I guess he is a sore loser in this one, but he actually won, because the message was effective. It is kind of an ironic spin, but God uses this plant to do an object lesson with him and teach him something. I mean, he provided shade, which is another thing. If you've got a problem with your attitude, but God is still providing you shade, then he is showing mercy once again. God is trying to help him understand that maybe he is too focused a little bit on himself, as opposed to what the Ninevites are going to get and what they are not going to get. Sometimes I focus too much on myself when actually God wants me to focus on how to be a blessing to others instead of just receiving blessings. And even though Jonah has an attitude, God is yet providing for him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; God has been providing for Israel for centuries. God has provided Israel with his blessing. He provided them with manna in the desert, and quail in the desert, and water in the desert. He provided them with the Promised Land of Canaan eventually. He provided them with good kings like David...

DARRELL DELANEY

And the law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He gave them the law. God has been good to Israel all along, and that was fine by them, so long as it didn't extend to anybody else. So again, as we said in the previous part of the program, Israel had come to see itself as sort of a members-only club, and they really weren't too interested in admitting any new members, certainly not these rotten Ninevites, right? We don't want them in the clubhouse, you know; but it is always a sad thing when you are the in group. Somebody once said that, you know, if you think of some exclusive country club that used to keep out a certain group of people...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, you know, they would blackball a certain group. People in this class, people with this skin color, whatever it might be, but somebody once said: You know, the last group that gets admitted to the country club is usually the first group to oppose the inclusion of the next group, because what is the sense of being in an exclusive club if you will let anybody in? Well, that was Israel's problem. As you said, Darrell, from the days of Abram forward in Genesis 12, they were supposed to be in the business of welcoming others in, but they fell from their calling.

DARRELL DELANEY

And all of that exclusive club stuff that you were just talking about there, Scott, it flies in the face of God's sovereignty.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is not because Israel was great or special or more important or more valuable. He said that: You were the weakest, you were the smallest, but I chose you because of my sovereignty. Now, that was great when it was working in Israel's favor, but now when God in his sovereignty chooses to forgive and relent against Nineveh, there is a problem there; but we need to understand that God can have compassion on whomever he wants, especially if they repent. He wants to relent; he wants to have a relationship with them; and repenting is actually what turns God's heart. So, if we relent...if we repent...if we are humble, that actually... I mean, compassion just flows out of God when he sees that happening in our hearts and in our lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is exactly right; and you know, in Hebrew the main word for repent is the word *shuv*, which means to turn...literally it means to turn around. In the New Testament it is *metanoia*, which means to have a turn of mind...

DARRELL DELANEY

A renewed mind.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A change of mind; but when we turn toward God, God is only too happy to see us coming back his way. God is always at our back, right? He is the hound of heaven...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, you know, be glad that you were included, because you just said, Darrell, Israel was elect by grace alone. They didn't earn it, right? God didn't give them the law in Egypt and say: When you obey all this perfectly, then I will set you free and you can be my people. No; he just sets them free by grace, then he gives them the law. We saw that in a recent series on *Groundwork* on the Ten Commandments. The law was a gift—the law was grace. It is all grace, and if it is all grace for me, why in the world would I want to stand in the way of somebody else getting that same grace? And yet, we have that human tendency, don't we?

DARRELL DELANEY

We do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To judge and to want to keep others at bay and to keep all of the grace to ourselves like little kids, you know; I want all the marbles, I want all the M&Ms, I want all the cookies. It is a childish way to behave, and it is a profoundly ungrateful way to live.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, because God in his nature continues to show mercy on whom he will have mercy, he actually gives this object lesson to Jonah with a plant. He gave him the plant, he took away the plant, but he cares more about people than he does about plants; and so, I think that the advantage that we have, Scott, is that Jonah didn't have what we have, and that is we have the New Testament...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And in the New Testament, in the book of James, we see this:

2:12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

That line...that last line... "mercy triumphs over judgment," that is the part that Jonah missed. It is consistent with the Lord's character in what he has shown to Jonah in his second chance; it is also what he has shown to the Ninevites. When I was a kid, my mom...I remember disrespecting her and disobeying her, and she sat me down and said: You deserve punishment, but I am not going to ground you. I am just going to tell you, make better choices in the future. I am going to give you a second chance.

I thank God that he is the one who gives second chances to us, but in this next segment, we want to look at what some practical applications of this book would be, so stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this final episode in a four-part series on the book of Jonah. We have been talking about God's character, Darrell, and Jonah's attitude toward God's character; and Jonah represents all Israel in this book. Jonah's problems are Israel's problems, and Israel's main problem is that when God was compassionate and merciful toward them, great. When God was compassionate and merciful toward the other, the Ninevites in this case, not great; and this whole fourth chapter of Jonah is challenging that lousy spiritual attitude.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, we don't corner the market on God's compassion, and neither do the Israelites, and neither does Jonah. I think he is missing that point, but I mean, our God is a strategic God. He uses all types of object lessons to get his point across, and I think these last two verses are pretty much like a checkmate for Jonah. He really doesn't have anything to say, because the Bible actually ends with God's last question, and in verses 10 and 11 it says: But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹And should I not have concern for the

great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

And then, the book is done...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if you turn the next page, thinking the story is going to go on, it is not, it is done. I think it is the only book the Bible that ends with a question...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which means it is on us. We don't know how Jonah answers the question, but God says: I am concerned about the cattle, I am concerned about the animals of Nineveh more than you are for the people of Nineveh...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You cared more about a plant than you care about the people or the animals of Nineveh. A hundred and twenty thousand people mean less to you than a plant, or your own privileged status as an Israelite; and God is basically saying: That is just sick, Jonah; that is wrong.

So, there is an open question. The book ends with an unanswered question because, Darrell, we have to answer the question; and hopefully, we will say: You are right, God; I didn't like that person. That group of people bothers me, but you saved them anyway. I am going to work on being grateful, because I have been saved by grace alone, so when I see somebody else saved by grace alone, whether I like that person or not, it is my job to be thankful, because they are not getting anything I didn't already get. They are getting saved the same way I got saved. I didn't get saved because I am special; I got saved because God is special.

DARRELL DELANEY

Exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He's got grace.

DARRELL DELANEY

You pointed out that Jonah's priorities are mixed up, and I think that sometimes ours are as well. So, I think some things that we can take away from this book in general is just to remember who God is. He is not someone who withholds his character...his kindness...his love...his mercy...his forgiveness. His character doesn't change, and that is most important for us to know about God in this, and not only in the book of Jonah, but all through scripture we see a God who changes not! He continues to show mercy; he continues to show compassion.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; the Israelites were called in the Old Testament to God-likeness; we are now called to Christ-likeness; and so, in the Sermon on the Mount, one of the Beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5: ⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is sort of like, you know, all through the New Testament...and you get this a lot, particularly with the Apostle Paul, but it is all through the New Testament...get with the program is sort of what Paul often says. You have been saved by grace, now turn around and offer grace to somebody else. You have been saved by grace, so try to live a gracious life yourself; because if you have saved by grace, and then you become a harsh, judgmental person, you just don't get it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You don't get it! Your head is not in the game. You've got to get it. When you receive grace, be gracious yourself, because otherwise, that is just sort of like thumbing your nose at God, or saying, you know, grace is only for me.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, that brings me to the third point: humble yourself. Sometimes we can feel rightfully justified in our anger, our pain, our frustration, of whatever situation that we are in; and sometimes that can cloud our judgment, blind us and make us vilify other people in a situation, or seek some sort of vindication. I think it is safe to say Jonah wanted vindication in this text for what Nineveh had done to his people, even though it hasn't been expressed in the passage; but he didn't want to go preach to them. He is like: Hey, repent; whatever. He didn't really have any enthusiasm. He walks through, and they still respond to the message; and who are we to withhold compassion and forgiveness and love to anyone? I mean, God has given it to us freely. The Bible says: Freely receive and freely give; and remember our lowly position.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, be humble; be thankful; and don't count anybody out. We talked a little bit about this in the previous program from Chapter 3. There are lots of surprises...lots of surprised people who show up in God's kingdom. The Ninevites make that list right here, for the time being, anyway. So, don't count anybody out. Don't just assume that somebody is unsavable. You don't know that. I think it was interesting in what we just read. I mean, God admits to Jonah: Look, the Ninevites don't know their right hand from their left. In other words, these are clueless people...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are not morally upright people. They are just sort of lost in a moral fog, but I love them anyway, and they repented. So, don't count anybody out.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think that you have also echoed this earlier, that we need to be grateful. I mean, God didn't have to have Jonah be a part of this redemptive plan for Nineveh. He doesn't have to use him as a message bearer to go and preach this gospel so that people can repent. He didn't have to redeem Nineveh when they repented. He didn't have to do any of these things. God doesn't need any one of us, but he desires to have us a part of his redemptive plan, and that starts with our own repentance. So, we need to be grateful that God actually wants us to be a part of his plan.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he wants us to follow his instructions. Jonah had to be told twice, and even the second time he went, but he did it half-heartedly, hoping he wouldn't succeed; but we want to be obedient, we want to be Christlike; and when we fail, we want to repent. Did Jonah repent? Did he answer God's open question at the end of Jonah 4 the right way eventually? I sure hope he did. I sure hope he reformed his ways and remembered the

mission of Israel to include all people; but again, the question is left open because I have to answer it, and Darrell, you have to answer it; and the Church today has to answer it; and hopefully our answer is: Yes; you are right to be concerned with all people, God, and so we need to be concerned with all people, too, and show them the grace of Jesus.

DARRELL DELANEY

And God is trying to teach Jonah, just like he is trying to teach us that his love and his mercy cannot be limited to one group of people on the planet. He wants every tribe, language, people and nation to worship him around the throne; and it is our mission to get that word out, to redeem humanity in the right spirit. Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we dig deeply into another scripture passage to lay the foundation for our lives. We have a website at groundworkonline.com. Please visit it. You can tell us what *Groundwork* means to you and make suggestions for future *Groundwork* programs.

DARRELL DELANEY

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