GOD’S CONCERN

Jonah 3:1–4:11

Key Verse: 4:11

“And 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?”

What do you really care about? We human beings are intelligent, but we’re notoriously self-interested; what concerns us most is usually related to ourselves. In today’s passage the people of Nineveh repent. But Jonah, the prophet who preached to them, is unhappy. Jonah can’t see the situation from God’s point of view, but only from his own. This passage challenges us to learn God’s heart for people, even for those we personally don’t like. We need not only to experience God’s mercy personally but also to practice his mercy towards others, so that God can use us as his people in this world. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Look at 3:1,2. This is how the book of Jonah begins in 1:1. God tells Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh, and now he’s giving Jonah a second chance to do it. But this time we notice some differences. In both cases God’s word comes to Jonah as an urgent command; in both cases the place is described as “the great city of Nineveh.” But in 1:1, the wickedness of the city is emphasized, while in 3:1,2 it is not. In 1:1 Jonah is told to preach “against” it, while in 3:2 he is told to preach “to” it. It means God wants them to accept it. The second time Jonah is told to give “the message I give you,” not his own message. Why the repetition? It shows us God’s determination. Though the first time Jonah ran away, God didn’t change his objective to get his message to the people of Nineveh.

This second time, instead of running away, Jonah immediately obeys “the word of the LORD” (3:3). Why does he obey this time? No doubt it’s because of what happened to him the first time, when he didn’t obey. As we saw last week, Jonah got caught in a terrible storm on the sea and then swallowed by a huge fish. He almost died. Jonah had experienced God’s warning, but also God’s mercy to save him. So this time he obeyed without hesitation.

But why did Jonah so strongly not want to go to Nineveh in the first place? It was because he knew those people were so wicked. He knew they were enemies of God’s people. Maybe Jonah could see into the future what the Ninevites would do to many people, including Israel. He couldn’t trust them. He thought he knew them better even than God. But God challenged him to do something he really didn’t want to do. Jonah could follow what he thought was right, what he felt like doing, or he could follow God’s direction. This time he decided to obey God’s command. Look at verses 3,4. The task God gave him was hard. It was a huge city. It implied that he would be totally outnumbered. They didn’t seem receptive to hearing God’s message. But because it was God’s message, Jonah gave it to them. He started speaking right away, on the first of the three days it took to walk through the city. We also see in verse 4 the message God gave him to give to the Ninevites: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” God was giving them a warning, but also the chance to think about it and repent, before it was too late. The word “overthrown” in Hebrew literally means “turned upside down.” Nineveh at the time seemed to be at the top of the world, the richest, most powerful city. But if they didn’t repent, God would bring them down to total annihilation. The Bible repeatedly tells us that God is able overthrow even the strongest, most intimidating people and nations, and lift up even the most humble people. In sharing his message in our time we still need this conviction about God.

What happened? Read verse 5. It was shocking: they actually listened and repented! Throughout history, when God sent his prophets to his own people, so often they stubbornly refused to listen. But all these unlikely Gentiles listened to God’s message right away, even though it came from this one strange, foreign prophet. It shows us the power of obeying God. It also shows us we can’t really know what’s in people’s hearts. They may look outwardly like they won’t listen, but God can actually help anyone to repent if he wants to.

Read verse 5 again. This also shows us the qualities of real repentance. Real repentance starts not with us, with how we feel or what we do; it starts with believing God. Believing God is not just believing that he exists theoretically; it means trusting him. It also means taking his word, his message, seriously. Believing in God means really listening to him. Only when we do this can we really begin to repent.

Next, real repentance involves taking our sin seriously. Everyone had to do it, from the greatest to the least. It shows that everyone is actually a sinner. And it says that all the Ninevites began to fast and wear sackcloth. So many people take eating food seriously; they never miss meals no matter what. But these people were willing to stop enjoying their meals as the expression of grieving because of their sin. Sackcloth is very rough, itchy cloth. Wearing it instead of normal clothes is uncomfortable. But the people were willing to make themselves so uncomfortable to show how serious they were about their grief and about making a change. Today so many people don’t take sin seriously. Everything seems relative or a matter of personal preference. But we can know what our sin even is, and how serious it is, only when we start listening to God. Sin isn’t a man-made idea; sin is whatever displeases God. It’s not about people and their views or judgments, but about God. If God is displeased with something in our lives, we should take him seriously, and even grieve over it.

In verses 6–9 we see how this united repentance came about. It was because of the king. When he heard about God’s message through his servant Jonah, he himself personally repented first. He took off his royal robes and put on sackcloth and sat in the dust. He greatly humbled himself. Why did he do that? He believed God’s message would come true. He took the warning seriously. He didn’t want his city to be destroyed by God. On the basis of his own repentance, he then asked that everyone else join him. It was urgent to him. Everyone, even the animals, had to fast and wear sackcloth. But we see here there’s even more to repentance. Let’s read verse 8b. Repentance means calling urgently on God, begging for his mercy. And repentance means making a real change in our lives. Repentance means giving up our evil ways and our violence. The Ninevites were world famous for violence to other peoples. We can’t act like we’re turning to God when all the while we’re being mean to people. So it’s never real repentance if we don’t actually change our behavior.

Look at verse 10. God noticed them. He noticed it wasn’t just superficial lip service; they were serious. He noticed how they humbled themselves before him, really listened to him and changed their ways. Because of this, he relented. It’s good news. There’s hope for even the most wicked people if we take God seriously, really cry out to him and change our ways.

The real problem is not the Ninevites; it’s Jonah! Look at 4:1–3. To Jonah, God’s mercy towards these wicked people seemed very wrong. He thought they deserved to be punished, not spared. He’s just like the older brother of the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable, who was angry and refused to go in when the father threw a great party for his lost son who was found (Lk15:28). It was the same as the Pharisees’ problem with Jesus’ ministry to tax collectors and sinners (Lk15:1,2). Very strict, self-righteous religious people never like God’s mercy and grace toward sinners. We may laugh at Jonah and at people like him, but we all have our own strong ideas of justice. We think certain people should never be forgiven for what they’ve done. We question the depth of their repentance. But it’s not for us to judge; repentance is between a person and God. If God accepts it, we should accept it, too. In fact, we should rejoice (Lk15:6,7,9,10,23,24,32).

We notice in these verses that Jonah doesn’t actually like God’s character. He says he knows that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Maybe he thinks God is too weak. To many people, too much love and grace can still seem weak. But God is not weak; God is strong. God who is the source of all justice is also the source of all mercy, and the Bible says his mercy triumphs over judgment (Jas2:13). As we repent and get closer to God, we learn to love him more and we become more and more like him. The fact that there are so many so-called religious people who are so angry and judgmental tells us that they haven’t really gotten close to God himself; they’re just following a bunch of rules.

How does God help Jonah? Look at verse 4. It reminds us of God’s word to Cain when he decided to accept his brother Abel’s sacrifice instead of his (Ge4:5,6). God was being so humble and so patient with Jonah, who had absolutely no right to be angry with God. In fact, Jonah himself had run away from God. He deserved to be swallowed and eaten by that huge fish, but God in his great mercy saved him. It’s a shame that people who’ve been shown such great mercy still have a hard time showing mercy to others (Mt18:26–30).

How does Jonah respond? Look at verse 5. It looks like he’s still hoping God will change his mind and destroy Nineveh. He’s pretty stubborn. What does God do with him? Read verse 6. God helps Jonah experience his grace yet again. Read verses 7,8. When things don’t go Jonah’s way, when he suffers some discomfort, he’s so quick to get upset and despair. Read verse 9. God repeats his question about getting angry, this time about the plant that withered. Jonah thinks he’s completely entitled to being angry. He’s so angry he wants to die. When he’s so emotional, he’s not learning anything from what God is trying to teach him.

Then God explains things to him. Read verses 10,11. There’s a contrast here between Jonah and God. Jonah did nothing for that plant, which he enjoyed for a brief time, yet he was so obsessed about it. God, on the other hand, was concerned not about something so small as a plant, but about an entire city full of so many people and animals. It’s implied that God is their Creator and Sustainer. He has the right to be concerned about them, because they belong to him. They give no benefit to him personally, but God is still deeply concerned for them. All the people of the world actually belong to God; without him they wouldn’t even be here. But God’s people can become so petty, so obsessed about small things having to do with their own comfort and convenience, but oblivious to the great need of the world and of God’s much bigger concerns. When we aren’t connected with God’s greater concerns, we get so upset about so many small things. Angry and judgmental believers are of no use to God. We need to learn to see people as God sees them, as helpless and lost, not knowing what they’re doing. If we’re going to truly repent, we need to learn God’s heart. Read 4:11 again. Thank God for his concern. May God open our narrow minds and hearts and help us learn his great concern for all the lost people in our time.