

Title: Sin as self-righteousness - Jonah 4

Purpose: To look at the another side of SIN as shown in that common and damning dynamic of **SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS**.

INTRODUCTION

Apollo 13 - aborted mission

It was the 11th April, 1970 and at precisely 07:13 GMT, Apollo 13 lifted off on the 3rd manned mission to the moon. Their destination the Fra Mauro Formation.

For those who might incline to being a bit on the superstitious side - Apollo 13 - might have made them a bit extra nervous.

Well 2 days into the flight **an Oxygen cylinder exploded in the Service Module** - and perhaps the **MOST REMEMBERED THING about this mission** - (one that then had to be aborted) - was the phrase that has since been widely adopted:

*** "Houston - we have a problem!" ***

Today, we are going from one aborted mission to another
- this morning, we are coming to that priceless short story of Jonah:

Wonderfully short story

And it really is a wonderful short story:

- it is just 4 chapters long - (under 50 verses in total)
- and only takes 5 minutes to read the whole thing (I did a check at home)

I don't know about you, but I love some of those **classic old fairy tales** - and I think one of the reasons that I like them is that things often happen that are very unexpected OR frankly ridiculous - there is frequently quite a **comedic element** about them.

Here in Jonah we have a few of those same elements:

- a prophet who decides that following God is, somehow, a really bad idea
- a massive storm and a big fish that swallows the prophet and returns him to square one
- and then you end up with that really "choice" last chapter

That's where we see the prophet getting into a right strop over a wilting vine!
It almost seems like comic genius!!

Don't get me wrong - *not* a fable

Now I don't want to give you the impression that **Jonah** is nothing beyond a simple fable - because we know from other parts of the Old and New Testaments that **Jonah** is talked about as a historical figure and the details of the story fit into what we know of the International Politics of the day around the 8th Century BC.

To put it quite simply, if the historicity of Jonah was enough for Jesus (the very Son of God), then who am I to suggest that the Bible contains a book that is essentially a "fairy tale", something just made up of nothing but myth & legend!!

Our structure

This morning, I have three points - or better we might call them phases (or even layers):

1. FIRST what I'm calling: "Jonah Behaving Erratically"
2. THEN "Jonah Behaving Badly"
3. LASTLY, to round off "God Behaving Graciously"

1] JONAH'S BEHAVING ERRATICALLY

Now:

- if SAUL (the first King of Israel) what not a great model of a King
- AND if SAMSON (that famed OT strong man married to Delilah) was not the greatest model of a Judge
- it might well be said that JONAH was not the greatest model of a Prophet

Like a bumblebee

Because I don't want to assume that we are all thoroughly familiar with this OT Bible Book - for a few moments I want to come at this book of Jonah a bit like a bumblebee - imagine that each of the four chapters are four flowers in the garden - and we are the bee and we going to literally bounce from one flower to the next without really stopping to draw any large amount of nectar from them - BUT when we get the final flower (that is Jonah chapter 4) we'll stop there somewhat longer and take more time to carefully suck out and enjoy the nectar there.

The basic storyline

So then, **bouncing onto the flowers of chapters 1, 2 and 3** let's pull out the necessary background so we know what's going on:

- **THE FIRST THING** to notice is something that really only a few of the English Bible translations preserve for us in English - simply because it tends to make the beginning of the book sound a little odd.

But in the Hebrew original - the book of Jonah starts with a "**connector word**" - a conjunction - so literally it starts like this: **"And then the word of the LORD came to Jonah..."**.

Q. Now why is this significant?

Well simply because it shows that Jonah is meant to be read as part of a somewhat larger history.

A larger history as regards the OT people of Israel AND ALSO as part of a larger history of this man Jonah.

- **SO WE ASK** - Q. What was Jonah's previous history?

Well back in the book of **2 Kings chapter 14** we read:

(Verses 23-25) "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the

one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, **in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amitai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.**"

The popular prophet

So here is **this one and the same Jonah** who clearly has known some good times when he would have been **quite popular with the people**. It is always nice to be the one to pass on messages of general prosperity and success to the people.

And so in the light of this - perhaps this might have been a factor in his "**FIRST-OFF response**" to this new commission that God is now giving him.

- **THE OPENING SCENE** does seem a little on the comical side:

God speaks to Jonah very clearly and says I want you to go on a preaching trip - the destination is 500 miles **North-East** from here. You'll know when you get there because you will find **a great metropolis** by the name of **NINEVAH**. (The ruins are still there today in Northern Iraq - not far from Mosul).

And Jonah says quietly under his breath - "Well you know what I have another destination that I have been so wanting to go and see - as it happens, it's just as far away to the **South and to the West** - it's called **TARSHISH!**"

Tarshish, although we don't for sure know where it is (quite possibly Southern Spain), is frequently talked about in the OT and it **was a place of prosperity** that exported all sorts of wonderful things such as **gold, silver, ivory, apes and baboons**.

Q. What was the problem with Ninevah? **Verse 2** tells us that **it's wickedness has come up before God**.

Ninevah was a chief city of the Assyrian super-power. From historical records we know that the Assyrians at the height of their power were a very terrifying people - not only did they have large, well-equipped and efficient armies - but they also used psychological warfare - they would leave behind heaps of skulls and flay people alive.

- **SO YOU CAN SEE** what might have been in Jonah's mind.

Here I am, I'm popular, things are going well and Assyria was not exactly on my vacation itinerary!!

Just as an aside - it is interesting to note that just because the succeeding events line up and work smoothly - does not, therefore mean that God is in it.

Jonah goes off to the local seaport at Joppa and there **just happens to be a boat** going exactly where he wants to go - it's even **at a price that he is happy to pay** - and **there's a space available too**.

Everything goes so smoothly - Q. Who could possibly want any more proof that God must be in it OR AT LEAST OK WITH IT!!?.

How easy it is to fall under the spell of our deceptive hearts - by way of either strong impulses and senses OR what seem to be, perhaps, a providential sequence of favourable circumstances.

- **SO ROUNDING OFF CHAPTER 1** - he's onboard the boat to Southern Spain, the sun is shining, Jonah is very happy **AND THEN God sends a terrible storm of his fury** and the sailors are petrified and then soon learn that it is all down to Jonah and his running away from God and so in the end they know they must throw him into the sea if they are to survive.

This they do and then God sends a "big fish" to swallow him alive.

Chapter 2

Now **chapter 2**, even more briefly:

- **IT COMES IN THE FORM OF A PRAYER** - prayed while he is inside the belly of the fish.

Not very surprisingly, this experience of sinking down and down, basically drowning in a furious sea, has had a **SOMEWHAT SOBERING EFFECT** let us say.

Jonah prays out of his distress, and also out of a realisation of his foolish disobedience, he says in **Verse 7ff**:

"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

'Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. **Salvation comes from the Lord.**"

He is acknowledging that in his own life he has been clinging to worthless things - things that have the status of an **IDOL** - Q. What is that? Well not something made out of silver or gold, wood or stone - but simply something or even someone to whom we pour out our devotion, to which we give the love of our hearts.

Chapter 3

Ok, on to **chapter 3**, and then we'll have done with our bouncing around:

So let me just read **Verses 1-5 and 10**:

Verses 1-5 "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.' The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."

Verse 10 "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."

So quite an unexpected turnaround - the people amazingly repent, they believe Jonah's preaching - it comes with the power of God - after all the Scripture is described as:

- a lamp to our feet and a light to our path
- a hammer that breaks the rocks apart
- something living and active - as a double-edged sword - penetrating even to soul and spirit - judging the very thoughts and attitudes of our hearts

And this brings us to Jonah chapter 4 and to the real meat of things.

We are heading on from #1 - Jonah behaving erratically to #2 what I'm calling:

2] JONAH BEHAVING BADLY

And as soon as we hit **Chapter 4**:

- rather than finding a nice happy ending
- rather than having a Jonah who is rejoicing at the wonderful success and inroads that the message of the God of Israel has had
- INSTEAD we get Jonah, by degrees going ballistic ("Houston, we have a problem"!!)

Now we had **Jonah chapter 4** read to us earlier on, so I won't read it all again - but you remember:

- how the LORD God cause this vine to grow up over night and how Jonah is incredibly happy
- and then how God destroys it just as quickly and Jonah is totally hopping mad and wants to die!!

Q. So what is Jonah's problem?

Well God points out 2 things that are not right:

- **THE FIRST** comes out in the last 2 verses of the book:

Jonah 4 verses 10&11 where we are reading that Jonah is angry enough to die to which the LORD God replies:
"...You have been **CONCERNED** about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. **BUT** Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

Clearly Jonah's scale of values is all upside down - he cares inordinately for a mere vine that has come and gone like a blade of grass that is here today and tomorrow is through into the fire. And yet he could not care less about this great gathering of 120,000 lost, broken, and needy souls who are like children who need to be taken by the hand and taken in hand!

(To say nothing of the animals - yes God even cares for animals too - after all they are his creation - though not made in His image as we are).

The keyword there is **CONCERN** - Jonah has a misplaced CONCERN.

Q. Doesn't this challenge us too?

As our society gets darker and progressively more hostile to Christian things -Q. What is your reaction?

It is quite easy to be like Jonah here and just want to retreat, to maybe find some place else which is more comfortable.

But God's logic is so utterly different - the darker it gets, the more violent and broken the city - the more His heart of love expands and explodes with compassion - the more His heart goes out to them.

You see God's heart gets very grieved over the good things He has made which are getting progressively broken to pieces - especially when that concerns people.

So Jonah's **CONCERN** - is clearly *NOT* in the right place (it's not that he doesn't have any - it is just that it is located in something , that by comparison, is completely trivial).

- **THE SECOND** of Jonah's problems, goes on from that of CONCERN to that of **ANGER**:

Not once but twice God comes to Jonah and asks him: "Q. Have you any right to be angry?"

Q. I wonder this morning if someone here is angry towards God?

- You feel that He has taken something away from you.
- That He has been unfair

And you are quite bitter about the whole thing - and just like Jonah you are trapped by the feeling that somewhat you have been robbed.

Jonah is so fundamentally upset and bitter that he is sapped from all desire to live.

Self-Righteousness

Now clearly Jonah's **misplaced concern**, his **disproportionate anger** are **JUST SYMPTOMS**.

*** There is a very evident "**DISLOCATION OF HIS HEART**" and I want to suggest that the answer is located in one of SIN'S GREAT DYNAMICS -> **that dynamic of SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS**. ***

Verse 2 brings this out - I'll read from Verse 1:

(Jonah 4 verse 1-3) "But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, 'O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'"

*** What he is revealing is that **he simply cannot stomach the fact** that God would give the same saving kindness and grace to these **UTTERLY UNDESERVING PEOPLE** as he has given to Jonah and the Israelites. ***

Explanation

Let me try and just develop and expand on this a bit:

The Bible teaches that **everyone is seeking for righteousness** BECAUSE the direct opposite of righteousness is **SHAME**.

Garden of Eden

So from the very beginning - when sin entered in the Garden of Eden in **Genesis chapter 3** - **mankind felt SHAME** and **they began the process of seeking righteousness by sowing together FIG LEAVES** as a covering for that keenly felt sense of shame.

That **SHAME** they felt pointed out the fact that they was a very tangible dislocation deep down in their being, deep down in their hearts.

So ever since mankind has been busy plugging the gap, filling the emptiness, covering the shame and creating their own **SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS**.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS takes the form of:

- whatever will **make me right**
- whatever will supply **a sense of worth**
- whatever will give me **meaning and confidence**

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS frequently **takes that which is good and then elevates it to the level of something** which will be **your glory, your covering, your security.**

See Jonah here - devastated

See Jonah here - he is **completely devastated** by the fact that God is giving the very same love and grace towards these irreligious, violent and wicked pagans that He has towards Jonah and his fellow-countrymen.

Jonah was proud of his loyalty to his own nation, proud of the fact that they had the word of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, proud that God chose to set His love upon them - but Jonah's self-image was based **on the feeling of "moral superiority", on a sense of their innate "deservingness"**, **THAT**, was his glory, that was his covering.

And so when God was showering grace upon wicked pagans - Jonah's fig-leaf covering was shredded!!

Personal application

Now for this to be more than a message to a far-away person, in a far-away time - we need to let this rub off on us.

Q. So, I wonder whether you can detect any "**SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS**" within yourself?

Let me supply you a few "litmus tests" to act as clues to filching out its possible presence within:

- **TEST #1 - SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS** can show up in the idea that God "**grades sins on a curve**"
 - that I am **decent**
 - that I'm a **whole lot better** than others
- **TEST #2 - SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS** shows in the sense that you are **deserving** - and that God, at a level, owes you some sort of return on that - that God is, to some extent obligated to bless you for your inherent "**deservingness**"!
- **TEST #3 - SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS** is seen by the attitude that this "**SIN-DYNAMIC**" is **only really the preserve of people that like to brag about themselves** - you know - people like those horrendous NT Pharisees always blowing their own trumpets
- **TEST #4 - SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS** emits that tell-tale **air of superiority**, that **pride & prejudice** that **comes from keeping control of your life**, from being that **self-made man OR woman**

One last suggestion for identifying SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS is:

- **TEST #5 - that just like Jonah we don't tend to be ANY REAL COMFORT TO "MESSED UP" PEOPLE.**

A remaining question

One question, I think that is left remaining with this book: Q. Is there any remedy to be had when all is said and done?

I think there is and that takes us to point #3 and what will function as our conclusion:

3] GOD'S BEHAVING GRACIOUSLY

God could clearly have left Jonah for dead in the deep blue sea - after all he was a prophet, if anyone should have known better it was him - he had the privilege of hearing from God in some sort of fairly direct manner.

Yet he goes spectacularly off the rails - he goes AWOL from God.

However, God is gracious and extends his gracious love and sends a big fish to swallow him and give him a second chance. (In fact - even more than this he sets things up so that Jonah's three day spell in "fish prison" will become a sign used by Jesus to point to his own death and 3 day later resurrection). All in all that's a lot of grace for a pretty messed up prophet!

When Jonah is locked in his specialist Mediterranean Cruise for one - he learns a vital lesson which he articulates for us in **[Jonah 2 and Verse 8]** "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs."

The only problem is that our idols cling rather well to us. We quickly fall back to our own **SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS**, we quickly bend down to pick up our own clump of fig-leaves that we have sowed together!

George Whitefield, the 18th Century evangelist preached a famous sermon under the title "**The Method of Grace**" in which he said (and I want to read a few paragraphs so we can get the full gist of things):

"... as Adam and Eve hid themselves among the trees of the garden and sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness, so the poor sinner when awakened flies to his duties and to his performances, to hide himself from God, and goes to patch up a righteousness of his own. Says he, I will be mighty good now—I will reform—I will do all I can; and then certainly Jesus Christ will have mercy on me. But before you can speak peace to your heart you must be brought to see that God may damn you for the best prayer you ever put up; you must be brought to see that all your duties—all your righteousness—as the prophet elegantly expresses it—put them all together, are so far from recommending you to God, are so far from being any motive and inducement to God to have mercy on your poor soul, that He will see them to be filthy rags..."

You may do things materially good, but you cannot do a thing formally and rightly good; because nature cannot act above itself.

Our best duties are so many splendid sins. Before you can speak peace to your heart you must not only be sick of your original and actual sin, **but you must be made sick of your righteousness**, of all your duties and performances. **There must be a deep conviction before you can be brought out of your self-righteousness; it is the last idol taken out of our heart.** The pride of our heart will not let us submit to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. But if you never felt that you had no righteousness of your own, if you never felt the deficiency of your own righteousness, you cannot come to Jesus Christ."

If you think that **George Whitefield** is over playing his hand - let me move forward a century to **Charles Spurgeon**, the greatest British preacher of the 19th Century - and to four choice comments of his on **SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS** he says:

- I have heard of an army, who, being defeated in battle, endeavored to make good a retreat. The soldiers fled to a certain river, where they expected to find a bridge across which they could retreat and be in safety. But when they came to the stream, there was heard a shriek of terror—"The bridge is broken, the bridge is broken!" All in vain was that cry, for the multitude hurrying on behind pressed upon those that were before and forced

them into the river, until the stream was glutted with the bodies of drowned men.

Such must be the fate of the self-righteous. You thought there was **a bridge of ceremonies**, that **baptism, confirmation**, and **the Lord's Supper** made up the solid arches of a bridge of good works and duties. But when you come to die, there shall be heard the cry, "**The bridge is broken, the bridge is broken!**"

It will be in vain for you to turn round then.

- You might as soon yoke a gnat with an archangel as think of your going in to help Christ save you. To join a filthy rag from off a dunghill with the golden garments of a king or a queen cannot be permitted. Christ will be everything, or else he will be nothing. You must be saved wholly by mercy, or else not at all. There must not be even a trace of the fingers of **self-righteousness** on the acts and documents of divine grace.
- Beware of **self-righteousness**. The **black devil of licentiousness** destroys his hundreds, but the **white devil of self-righteousness** destroys his thousands.
- It is easier to save us from our sins than from our righteousness. Our self-righteousness is that hideous boa constrictor which seems to coil itself round and round our spirit, and to crush out of us all the life that would receive the gospel of the grace of God.

Q. So then does Jonah ever learn this lesson?

Q. Does he ever get to that place where he fully lays down his own damning & pitiable SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS?

Well, the story **ends in an open manner** - we *don't have a Jonah chapter 5* to tell us -

HOWEVER, that said, the very fact that we *do have a Jonah chapter 4*, which shows up Jonah in such a very bad light, and that would suggest that Jonah has been able to move on and let these embarrassing records see the light of day for people like you and me to learn from.

CONCLUSION

Returning to where we began - Apollo 13 was an aborted mission - **HOWEVER**, if you know the story Apollo 14 was a 2nd bite at the cherry and it did successfully accomplish what could not be in the first mission. How much rejoicing there must have been!

Jonah's SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS was a massive barrier to rejoicing upon the 2nd successful attempt preaching the good news of peace with God to those at badly lost and broken people at Ninevah.

But we have good reason to believe that Jonah finally got the message - as **George Whitefield** expressed it:

"...self-righteousness; it is the last idol taken out of our heart."

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS - is surely one age-old and mighty operating dynamic of SIN.

However - Jonah got the key message about grace:

"...Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good.

Salvation comes from the Lord."

Let us pray ... AMEN