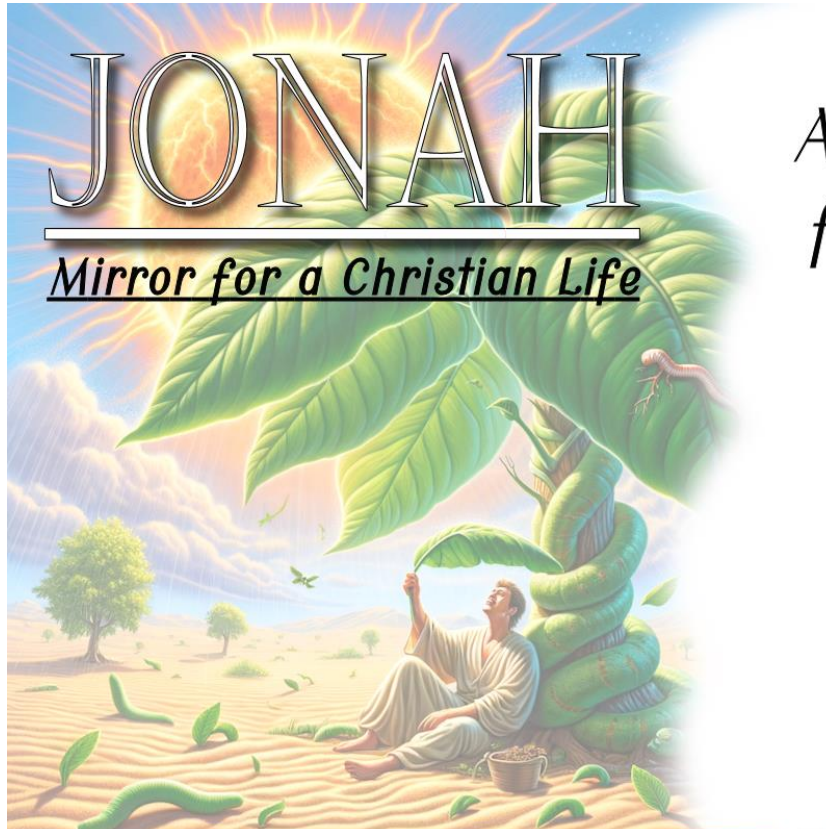


Special of Music: "Grace of God"

Ben Fuller

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mnf-zAKVSDE>



A Parable for Jonah

Jonah 4:1-11

Jonah 4:1-11

1 But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

2 He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That 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.

3 Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

4 But the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

5 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.

6 Then 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.

7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.

8 When 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."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

10 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.

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?"

THE NATURE OF JUSTICE

The more he thought about it, the angrier Myron got. Justice was supposed to be fair and balanced. And while he had been initially happy about Speedy's limited punishment for burning down Ms. Callaway's shed, the more he pondered it, the more he believed that justice had not been served. After all, when Myron had made his mistake, look at all the hoops he had been forced to jump through. He even spent time in jail. Knowing what he had gone through and was still going through, it seemed to Myron that his sentence had been extremely harsh compared to what happened to Speedy. Speedy didn't even have to spend a single night in jail! It just didn't seem fair. After all Myron had been through and all the things he had accomplished, you would think Judge Darling would at least knock off some his community service hours. But, oh no, that was never going to happen. Myron was angry enough that he decided that he was going to talk to Judge Darling and demand a better outcome for himself. He called the judge's office and spoke with her assistant, Becky Noble, and made an appointment to see the judge. Myron believed it was his right to get things balanced out.

His appointment wasn't until the following week, so he had time to think about what he was going to tell the judge and make his case. He never even considered calling his lawyer, Alice Charm. This was a matter between him and the judge, and he didn't want anyone else involved.

Myron was at the Sheriff's Office on Friday to take care of some of his weekly chores. He emptied the trash cans and swept the floors, but the people could see that he obviously didn't have his mind on his work and that there was something gnawing at him. He barked at Deputy Wagner when she didn't move her feet out of the way quick enough when he was sweeping, and he told Dusty Forrester that he hoped he didn't expect him to wash his coffee cup. Everyone just tried to stay out his way like people will do when their friends are in a bad mood. He went to Sheriff Thom's office to empty the waste can. He didn't even see Sheriff Thom standing behind the door reaching for something in his closet, but as Myron pulled the trash bag from the can and inserted a new one, Sheriff Thom closed the door.

"Sit down, Myron," said the Sheriff.

"I'm busy right now, Sheriff. Maybe later," replied Myron.

"Maybe right now, Myron. Drop what you are doing and take a seat."

"Sheriff, I don't have time for this. I have too much to do," Myron said.

"Myron, this is not a request, and I am not going to tell you again. Sit. Down. Now!"

Myron realized he might have let things go too far. It was obvious that the Sheriff wasn't going to take 'No' for an answer. Biting his teeth, he plopped down with an attitude into a chair across from Sheriff Thom's. Never a good way to start a conversation.

Sheriff Thom had something in his hand as he walked back to his desk. Whatever he had in his hand was rolled up in a rag. The Sheriff toyed with the rag and then looked up at Myron, who still had his teeth clenched and anger visible in his forehead and his eyes. Sheriff Thom hadn't seen this kind of defiance in the young man in a while. Myron has been doing so well. Something was definitely causing him distress.

“Myron, tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Sheriff. Nothing is going on.”

“Myron, do I look like an idiot? I’ve seen the way you have been treating people around the office. You’ve got something stuck in your craw. Now, spit it out.”

“It’s nothing, Sheriff. And even if it were, it’s none of your business.”

“Hold on there, Myron. Have you forgotten who you are talking to? Besides the fact that we don’t talk like that around here, I’m your friend. You know that. You’re obviously upset, and I want you to tell me what this is all about.”

“Ah, Sheriff, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Well, I certainly won’t if you don’t talk to me about it. This isn’t like you Myron. I’m not here to get angry with you and I would like to help. Now, what in the world is going on?”

Myron crossed his legs and squinched his face. He rubbed his hands together like he was wringing out a wet cloth. He looked at the pictures on the wall and the Sheriff's commendations while also taking in the bric-a-brac on the shelves that comes with staying in one place for a long time.

"Well?" the Sheriff said. "I have all day, Myron. Best you get on with it and start talking."

Myron clenched the arms of the chair he was in, shook his head and then shouted, "It not fair. That's all. It just isn't fair."

"What in the world are you talking about, Myron? You're going to have to give me a little more than that if you expect me to help you."

"It isn't fair that all of you have put me through the ringer for months because of what I did, and Speedy only got a slap on the wrist. That's what is wrong!"

"Whoa. Settle down, Myron. It that what has been eating you up? You comparing your punishment to Speedy's?"

"He burned down a shed and put Ms. Callaway and her girls in danger and he didn't even get a single day in jail? What's up with that Sheriff? Why did I have to spend weeks in jail and have to do so much more community service, not to mention all the people I had to reimburse for my mistake. It just isn't fair, Sheriff! I got Speedy to turn himself in and I got nothing for doing that! I'm still facing months of community service and paying back my debt. He should at least have to spend a few days in jail!"

“Myron, calm down. Who made you judge and jury for Speedy? Have you forgotten how hard the people of this town have worked to keep you out of prison? You are never going to get ahead in life trying to balance some invisible scale in the universe. You are responsible for your debt and Speedy is responsible for his.” The sheriff paused for a minute before continuing. “Do you know what I have in this old rag?”

“No...,” Myron said gruffly.

The Sheriff unwrapped the rag to reveal a badge, tarnished and worn. “This belonged to my Uncle Jesse. He was a Texas Ranger. I pulled it out because I wanted to show it to you. He was shot and killed one day when he tried to deliver a warrant. He was a good man. He left behind his wife and three little girls. His killer got away and was never found. Aunt Martha gave me this badge when I graduated from the academy. When she gave it to me, she hugged me saying, ‘I don’t give this to you for you to feel sad. I give this to you as a reminder that life is not always fair in our eyes. It is by showing grace and mercy that we are able to live with our disappointments and find meaning in life.’ I’ve never forgotten those words from a woman that life treated so unfairly. If she can find grace to keep going, maybe you might, too. The people that love you do not deserve to be treated the way you have been treating them, just because you think life is unfair.”

Myron slumped in the chair, feeling ashamed for the way he had behaved. He sat for several minutes just staring at the badge in front of the Sheriff. He knew that he needed to fix this. The Sheriff was right. It seems that his own

expectations of justice had caused him to forget all the love he had been shown over the last several months. He apologized to the sheriff, took the garbage bag to the dumpster, and then apologized to both Deputy Wagner and Dusty Forrester. Lastly, he cancelled his appointment to see the judge. It seems that instead of demanding justice as he saw it through his own eyes, he needed to work on his own mercy and grace in light of recent events. For some reason, he suddenly had the urge to help Speedy rebuild that shed for Ms. Callaway.

I know that I struggle when God has me take a good long look in the mirror and see where I am falling short. We don't want to acknowledge it. We want to sit in the judge's chair or maybe be in a position where we can overrule what we believe is a judge's poor decisions. Sometimes, we have a very difficult time letting go of our opinions when we believe that we are right, even though we don't know all the facts or have the authority to question other people's decisions. Sometimes, our view of justice becomes completely black and white, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. And when we allow the anger to boil up and grab onto the notion that revenge equals justice, we lose sight of "turn the other cheek" and "love our enemies." When human justice fails to live up to our own opinions, we often feel we can just ignore the judge and run our mouths off, calling it truth. Our opinions on justice can leave us blind to the teachings of Jesus, forgetting our pledge to our Savior to follow his teachings. God's justice and human justice are two different things. As humans, we try to make justice black and white, and that often excludes grace and mercy. God doesn't do justice by the numbers, but by the heart.

1 But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

2 He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That 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.

3 Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah went out on a hill on the east side of Ninevah to watch the fireworks that never came. The people had repented, and God had cancelled the pyrotechnics. And Jonah thought this was wrong. Just like Myron thought that the Sheriff and Judge had been too easy on Speedy. Jonah was so involved with himself that he couldn't stand that fact that God had done just what Jonah thought he would do. It was just wrong on so many levels. In Jonah's eyes, the fact that the Ninevites had repented and begged for forgiveness didn't wipe out all the pain and suffering that they had caused. They may have changed their minds and their ways, but God should have done something to punish them. God's justice didn't meet up with Jonah's understanding of justice.

So, Jonah is sitting up on the hilltop, angry with God because he feels foolish. He had been preaching death and destruction until he ran out of breath and his throat became dry and hoarse. Now he was sitting there hoping that God would do right by Jonah's opinions and go ahead and destroy the city. Jonah felt it was the only thing that would make him less of a fool and more like a prophet. He was so angry and self-humiliated that all he wanted to do... was die. "If your goal was to make me a fool in everyone's eyes, Lord, then you have succeeded. But I don't want to have to deal with the ramifications of that. I don't want to look foolish and powerless. Just let me die!"

I am always amazed that when I get angry with God, he never gets angry with me. From a human standpoint, he has every right to be angry with me. But he doesn't do that. Instead, he speaks calmly with me. He comforts me. He lets

my hissy fit wear itself out so that he can talk rationally with me and help me find fresh truth and perspectives.

It is astounding how some mothers have that extra something that helps them deal with screaming children, without getting angry. It may mean picking up that child in the midst of its temper tantrum and taking them back to the car until they are able to recompose themselves. But that special mother does not allow the anger of the child to drive them to being angry themselves. I wish we were all that way. God does that with us. He is not going to give into our tantrums, and he will not get angry just because we can't seem to control our own thoughts and opinions. Oh, that we could bring ourselves to allow that same attitude in our lives as we engage with others.

But God had a way to help Jonah do just that. Rather than punish Jonah, he chooses to show him an example of how his anger needs to be handled.

6 Then 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.

7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.

8 When 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."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

Don’t you know that Jonah felt like God was picking on him. He felt like he had a right to be angry. He didn’t have the patience of Job in his demeanor:

**“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.^[a]**

**The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised.” Job 1:21**

Instead, Jonah is crying out to God to let him die. He is throwing a tantrum. He would rather return to ashes than live in an unjust world, an unfair world. A world that doesn’t adhere to his own pride and cattywampus views. “I believe that God is unjust, therefore, God is unjust. Just ask me and I will tell you why! God allows evildoers to escape punishment and punishes those who do what he asks.” And now he is angry about a plant because he is already angry with God. He fully believes that God had the worm eat the plant just to make Jonah uncomfortable. Just to punish him, in spite of the fact that Jonah had done everything God had asked of him. That just proves to Jonah that God is an unjust God.

All too often, we think the same thoughts. “A just God would never allow the bank to take my land just because I fell behind on a few payments.” “A just God would never let my spouse get cancer.” “A just God will never let bad people prevail.” “A just God would never allow a tornado, flood, or hurricane destroy my home.” “A just God will never break his promises.” The problem is that we

forget that many of the promises that God makes in the Bible are for certain people in certain situations. God never promised us that we would be fathers and mothers of many nations. That was a promise made to Abraham. God never promised us a home in the promised land. That was a promise for the Israelites. God never told us that he would defeat the armies in our path for us. That was a promise made to many leaders in the Old Testament. It is up to us to bring our battles to God and await his promise for our situation. God never promises us that we will always have beautiful, sun shiny days with just enough rain to meet our needs.

Matthew 5:45 say this: **“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”** But we don’t like it when bad people get the same benefits that we do. We think that God has taken promises meant for us and given them to those that don’t deserve it. God chose to save Ninevah. God chose to destroy the plant that gave shade to Jonah.

I once made the mistake of mentioning to a close friend that I was so blessed that my eldest child had not died in childbirth like the doctors expected. He immediately responded, “Does that mean you think that I am not blessed because my first child did die in childbirth?” It took me a long time and a lot of prayer to wrap my head around that. Just because something bad happens to us does not mean that we aren’t blessed or that God is punishing us for something.

God went on to explain to Jonah his truth about justice using the example of the plant, a real-life parable, by saying,

10 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.

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?”

I hate to have to put it bluntly, but God doesn't really care about how we view justice other than to let us know that our own sense of justice is often perverted by circumstance and perspective. God makes the rules. Not us. And we have never been, nor will ever be given the authority to question the justice of the Creator of the Universe, no matter how obtuse we think that justice is.

I want us all to think about these things this week. Are we challenging the justice that God delivers because we think it isn't fair? Do we bring our obstacles before God before we engage with them, or do we wait until after we fail and blame God for his lack of justice? Have we decided in our prideful minds that God's justice is inadequate and raise our fists in anger because we don't like the justice that he delivers? Do we believe that we have the authority to question God's justice and overrule his decisions?

I believe we all know the answers to these questions, but we still need to ask the questions and see if our answers make any real sense in a world where human justice seems to prevail. We just don't like to admit it. It makes us feel like we aren't in control. And we aren't. We just think we are.

I encourage you to take time to read through the Book of Jonah again and dig for deeper meaning beyond what we have grown up with. It really is much more than a fish story and is completely relevant for our lives today. When we shake our fists at our Creator, questioning his justice in this world, let us instead open our minds and hearts to see the world through God's eyes so that we can see what justice is really all about as God's love and mercy create a system of compassion and trust.

God bless you all!

AMEN

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