



In his book, “A Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism,” Tim Keller quotes that noted theologian Darth Vader, who says to a colleague, “I find your lack of faith disturbing.” When we turn to the book of Jonah, we encounter a lack of faith that is devastatingly disturbing. That is because this lack of faith belongs to the prophet himself! Jonah, that reluctant prophet, was so opposed to the Lord’s “outreach” to Nineveh, the key city of the cruel Assyrian empire so scorned by Israel, that he attempted to flee from his prophetic responsibility. Having been swallowed by a great fish and deposited on the seashore, Jonah then made his way to Nineveh. In short, after Jonah delivered the Lord’s message of impending judgment, the people of Nineveh repented in a massive outbreak of revival. At this point one would expect that Jonah would have been overjoyed with the outpouring of God’s mercy upon Nineveh. However, rather than praising the Lord, Jonah became the pouting prophet. In fact, he even requested death for himself (Jonah 4:4). What follows in Jonah 4:5-11 is the account of God graciously teaching Jonah about the importance of having pity on the city. Today, obedience to our Lord’s Great Commission and the viability of our Cooperative Program hinge on a gospel-sensitivity with reference to the city, the masses of people whose lifestyles we may find completely repulsive.

1. Consider your response to the city (5)

Notice that the term “city” appears three times in verse 5. Repetition in the Old Testament is often used to call attention to a particular matter or issue. Clearly, the focus at the end of Jonah is on the “city.” Jonah’s response to it and its spiritually needy people was less than stellar. He wanted to give up. The Lord had failed to perform according to Jonah’s expectations. The Lord pitied the Ninevites rather than pulverizing them. Jonah should have rejoiced at the lavish outflow of God’s mercy. Instead, he separated himself from the city and attempted to shelter himself from the sun. Why wasn’t Jonah in the city where he could minister to the multitude of repenting citizens? “East” in verse 5 implies distance or separation. Jonah removed himself from the city and, in effect, became a spectator on the sideline. The text indicates that Jonah was waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh. Obviously, he was hoping that the Lord would move in judgment and obliterate the city. With a growing awareness that God was indeed sparing the city, Jonah was ready to throw in the prophetic towel. Jonah was looking for a “change” in Nineveh when he should have been looking for a change in himself. As a prodigal prophet, Jonah begrudged the grace of God being shown to anyone but his own people.

2. Observe the Lord's instructive appointments (6-8)

Jonah was caught between the vise of his own self-will and the strong hand of God. The good news is that the Lord was not willing to give up on Jonah just as He had not given up on Nineveh. Observe the Lord's initiative in restoring His reluctant prophet. Previously, He used a great fish. Here in Jonah 4, He used a plant, a worm and a wind. All of these were ordained instruments which were implemented for the purpose of bringing Jonah back into fellowship with God. Sadly, Jonah persisted in his angry and selfish spirit. With great compassion, the Lord provided a plant to give shade to the weary and weathered prophet. This made Jonah very glad. The plant sheltered him from discomfort. The God of the sea who produced a fish to swallow Jonah could also produce a plant to shade him. Interestingly, the word translated "discomfort" in verse 6 is the same word used of the "evil" of Nineveh in Jonah 1:2 and the "disaster" God had threatened through Jonah in Jonah 3:10. What does all of this mean? It means that, just as the Lord protected Jonah through the plant, He had shown a similar protection to Nineveh through His compassion and grace. With verses 7-8 we may observe that God is committed to our piety rather than our pleasure. He sent a worm to destroy the plant. Yes, Jonah needed the shade and the rest. However, he needed much more than rest without repentance. Following an ordained worm, there came an ordained wind. Jonah, who wanted Nineveh "torched" was now being scorched by a burning wind. Jonah at this point literally "asked with his life to die." One commentator has noted that God was driving the Pharisee spirit out of Jonah. He had become indifferent to and ignorant of the true nature of his heart. As a prophet he had an "application" problem. He knew that it was God's nature to be gracious and merciful. Yet, he didn't want either of these qualities extended to the city of Nineveh. Therefore, it appears that the Lord destroyed the plant and sent a scorching wind so that Jonah could see how much he liked his theology coming true in the physical realm. The "shoe" that Jonah wanted Nineveh to wear was now on his foot!

3. Catch the dramatic contrast (9-11)

In a real sense Jonah "loved" the plant that brought him comfort. Its removal left him outraged and ready to die. In an atmosphere charged with emotional electricity, the Lord delivered the final blow. God spoke to Jonah and said literally, "Do you do well to be hot...?" Jonah responded with an angry affirmative answer. The reality was that his compassion for the plant was not centered on the plant but rather on what the plant did for him. It made him comfortable and happy. His was a self-centered compassion. In contrast, God truly cared for the citizens of the city of Nineveh. Notice here that the Lord's approach with Jonah was an inquiring rather than indicting approach. Even when Jonah was in a hardened state of rebellion, the Lord dealt graciously with him, just as He had graciously dealt with the city of Nineveh. Graciously, yet firmly, the Lord exposed a fundamental pettiness in his prophet. Jonah seemed to care more about a plant than he cared about a people! What a devastating critique for Jonah and for us. Do we care more about our gardens, homes, pets, portfolios, sports and "stuff" than we care

about fellow human beings and sharing the gospel with them? Recently I came across an article by Danielle Kurtzleben, a writer for U.S. News and World Report, who studied spending trends by American households. Her research indicated that Americans spent 61 billion dollars on their pets in 2011! I am not opposed to Fido or Fluffy in American homes. However, information such as this exposes the fallacy of “no resources for giving” and the misplaced values of our culture. Do we care more about our own pets, plans, pleasures and comforts than we care about the evangelization of the world in our generation? In 2008, research from our North American Mission Board indicated that there were at least 250 million persons in North America who had no personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The message of Jonah screams for us to have pity on the city! In verses 10-11, the Lord challenged Jonah to engage in some honest reflection. As a fallen sinner, Jonah had “compassion” on a plant he did not create, toil over or cause to grow. Yet he had no compassion for an entire city on the verge of destruction. In dramatic contrast, God asked, “Should not I pity Nineveh...?” The clear implication was that God was the source of the city’s existence and sustenance, including people and the cattle that served as a key food source for them. His pity on the city demonstrated his merciful, forgiving, pursuing nature.

#### 4. How will we finish the story?

We are not informed as to how matters ended with Jonah. His story and the book that bears his name have been left open-ended. This unfinished and incomplete conclusion summons us to examine ourselves. The truth is that there is a “Jonah” in all of us. Before we are harsh with the prophet, we should remember that his assignment would be akin to us being summoned to share the gospel in Nazi Germany during the days of World War II or being summoned to travel to the Middle East in more recent years to evangelize Osama Bin Laden. Like Jonah, we may seek to restrict the blessing and favor of God to “our” people, whoever those people may be. Like him, we may conclude erroneously that some persons are not worthy of a message of hope from the Lord. However, we must remember that our Lord Jesus came to seek and save the very people that the self-righteous religious leaders of His day disdained and avoided. Jonah’s life hung on the very mercy that he resented being shown to the city of Nineveh. Jonah needed to apply what he himself recorded in Jonah 2:9: “Salvation belongs to the Lord!” The infinite value of God and the infinite mercy He delights to show dictate that His heart for the city must govern ours. When that occurs, we will have an enthusiasm for the God who has pity on the city and pity on us. When that occurs, Cooperative Program giving will be seen as more than a denominational device to promote missions giving. It will be seen for what it truly is- a marvelous opportunity to join hearts and hands with others so that all may know the God who has pity on the city.