

Lost People Matter to God

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Jonah 4:1-11

Introduction

- What is the greatest verse in the Bible? Which particular Scripture, more than any other, sums up the message of God's holy Word? There are many candidates to be sure, but when it is all said and done I believe the greatest verse in the Bible is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten ('unique, one of a kind') Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."
- Here in just 25 words we discover the incredible truth that God loves us and that lost people matter to God. Indeed they, you, matter so much, God gave up His only beloved and precious Son to die on a cross that you and I might live with Him forever.
- Our God is a God with a lost world on His mind. He is a God with a missionary heart. He is in hot pursuit of lost men and women, boys and girls who need to be saved from their sin. And, no one, not a single person on the planet is beyond His grace, His love, His concern.
- Unfortunately, God's children do not always look at a lost world in the same way that God does. We sometimes look down on the lost, forgetting that we were once lost and separated from God. Incredibly, we can become so self-righteous that we believe some people are too bad, too evil, too wicked, and therefore undeserving of God's amazing grace. The thought of their destruction can actually bring us joy rather than break our heart. The murderer, the rapist, the drug dealer, the prostitute, those who traffic in child pornography, the homosexual, the dope addict, these, and others just like them, are getting what they deserve.
- Jonah 4 confronts each of us with an incredible truth and a haunting question we cannot escape: lost people matter to God. Do lost people matter to me? Do we long for the

conversion and salvation of the lost like God, or do we ignore them or even long for their condemnation and destruction like Jonah?!

- It would be pretty easy to outline the four chapters of Jonah in the following fashion: chapter 1 – Jonah is running **away** from the Lord; chapter 2 – Jonah is running **to** the Lord; chapter 3 – Jonah is running **with** the Lord; and, chapter 4 – Jonah is running **against** the Lord. In chapter 4, Jonah is forced to look at himself and it is not a pretty picture. He is more concerned with his own comfort than the souls of Nineveh. Self-centered and self-absorbed, he lacks compassion for the lost.
- Jonah learns, however. As we must, that God’s love has no limits. And, God’s people are to mirror His limitless love in their attitudes and actions towards others who need to hear the life-changing gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s people need to understand that although they may try to run from and rebel against God’s plan and purpose in their life, God will not give up on them. Our lord is indeed the **Hound of Heaven** who diligently pursues his children until He accomplishes His purpose in their lives and they come to see the world as He sees it.

I. **Never Forget Who God Is.** (4:1-4)

- (Joel 2:12-14) says “*Rent your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity.*”
- The tears of Nineveh’s repentance cooled the heat of God’s anger. Nineveh repented, and God’s hand of judgment was stayed. One would think that Jonah would be thrilled, that he would be the happiest prophet on the earth. God had used His simple message to bring about a city-wide revival. However we find that God’s reluctant

missionary is anything but pleased. Although Jonah had learned to obey God's commands, he had not learned to love others.

1. God is Available. 4:1-2

- Jonah's message to the Ninevites was from God, but his attitude certainly was not. God's graciousness and compassion for the Ninevites made Jonah angry, and the Lord was there to hear his prophet gripe and whine. Jonah did not share God's love for the Ninevites and did not want to see them spared.

Jonah actually hoped that a Sodom and Gomorrah judgment would fall. When Jonah saw that this would not be the city's fate (lit. "It was evil to Jonah with great evil") he told God that he preferred to die rather than to live.
- He preferred death rather than a world where God would save such an evil and wicked people like those who lived in Nineveh. The God who was available to a Hebrew prophet was also available to pagan Gentiles. Nineveh's repentance led to a response of mercy and grace from the Lord. All of this brought great displeasure to Jonah.
- What pleased God displeased Jonah. He went from preaching prophet to pouting prophet. God sparing Nineveh was a disaster in the eyes of Jonah.
- Why is it that Jonah became so displeased at what God had done? Why did Jonah want Nineveh's destruction? There are several possible answers. First, there may have been a racial/national motivation. Jonah was a Hebrew. The Ninevites were Gentiles. Jonah may have harbored bigotry in his heart toward these people. Jonah was also a proud citizen of the nation of Israel. Nineveh belonged to the evil

empire of Assyria. His nationalist identity may have contributed also to his disdain toward the people in Nineveh.

- Second, there may have been a moral motivation. The Assyrians were an evil and wicked people. Their influence and power, though perhaps in a time of weakness, was growing and ominous. Jonah would have certainly recognized them as a threat to the borders of Israel. That God would bring judgment of a complete and swift destruction upon a threat to the nation of Israel was something Jonah longed to see. He would do nothing to prevent God's hand of judgment from falling upon this people, and as a result, he fled from the Lord in chapter 1. Evidently he explained to the Lord that this was why he was not going to be obedient to his call to go to Nineveh. His question in verse 2 bears this out: "Oh, Lord, is that not what I said when I was still at home?"

We have seen quite an odyssey in the life of Jonah. In chapter 1 he was disobedient. In chapter 2 he was thankful. In chapter 3 he was obedient. Now in chapter 4 he is angry.

- Jonah continues his angry prayer with what had become a creed or confession of faith among the Hebrew people. Five affirmations concerning character of Israel's God are stated. "I know you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, one who relents from doing harm." Jonah's statement is basically a quotation of an ancient formula first found Exod. 34:6-7. It occurs some 10 times in the Old Testament and is alluded to in other places as well (Joel 2:13; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Pss. 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Nah. 1:3; 2 Chr.

39; and also Pss. 111:4, 112:4, and 116:8). In this confession of faith, God's nature is beautifully described.

- Not only is God available; He is also...

2. God is Gracious. 4:2

- God is kind in His attitude and actions toward those who are undeserving. He does for sinners that which they do not deserve.

3. God is Merciful. 4:2

- God is compassionate. He is loving. And He is merciful. Like a loving mother towards her children so is our God to those made in His image.

4. God is Longsuffering. 4:2

- God is slow to anger. God does not have a *quick fuse*. He is patient and long-suffering. It is not God's inclination to immediately bring judgment upon those whom He has created and whom He loves. God's first response is to be slow in getting angry, even in the face of sin and rebellion.

5. God is Loving. 4:2

- God is abounding in love. The word for loving-kindness (*ESV*, "steadfast love") is the Hebrew word *hesed*. The word refers to the covenant faithfulness and love of God. It is probably the most important term in verse 2. It is a rich word in Hebrew thought.
 - It is variously understood and translated to mean "loving-kindness; steadfast love; covenant loyalty; grace; mercy; faithfulness; goodness; devotion." The word is used 240 times in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms.
 - *Hesed* involves obligation and also generosity. It entails loyalty and mercy.

- *Hesed* implies personal involvement and commitment in a relationship. The Bible speaks of someone “doing,” “showing,” or “keeping” *hesed*.
- *Hesed* is one of God’s most fundamental characteristics. His loving-kindness is offered to his people, who need redemption from sin, their enemies, and trouble. A repeated confession describing God’s nature is that he is “abounding in *hesed*” (Ex. 34:6; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 103:8; Jonah 4:2) Creation is the result of God’s *hesed* (Ps. 136:5-9). His love lasts for a “thousand generations” (Duet. 7:9; cf. Deut. 5:10 and Ex. 20:6), indeed, “forever.”
- *Hesed* is God’s particular and specific love for His chosen people with whom He is in covenant. *Agape* is the closest New Testament equivalent to *hesed*. Both terms accurately and beautifully speak of God’s covenant love and faithfulness to those who are recipients of His grace.
- Kindness, loyalty and unfailing love are all terms that depict the beauty of this Hebrew idea. Indeed, No single English term can adequately express the meaning of *hesed*.

6. God is Forgiving. 4:2

- God is one who relents from doing harm or “disaster.” The word is the same that has previously been translated “evil” or “trouble” in the book of Jonah.

7. God is Patient. 4:3-4

- God’s grace toward Nineveh is simply more than Jonah could bear. In verse 3 he requests the death sentence for himself: “Therefore, O Lord, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

- Jonah's words in v. 3 are quite similar to those of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4. There we find another prophet of God praying for death. Moses voiced similar words in Num. 11:15. Jonah was angry and depressed. Nineveh's salvation had stressed him out to the point that death looked better than life.
- Jonah, perhaps, could not deal with a world that no longer made sense to him. Nineveh has become the recipient of God's grace, while Israel is destined to suffer at their hands (722 B.C.) because of her rebellion and disobedience. Jonah simply could not process all of this. A disobedient Israel was better than a repentant Nineveh in his estimation. A world in which God forgives Israel's enemies is simply a world that Jonah does not wish to be a part. He would prefer death to serving a patient, loving, and forgiving Lord, a God who refuses to place limits on His grace. Jonah is living proof that you can dot every theological "i" and cross every theological "t" but still not know the heart of God.
- **Application**
 - "Whose heart do you have?" Do you have the heart of God or do you have the heart of Jonah? Our God is a God with a missionary heart. Missions is rooted in God's all-encompassing purpose and love. No one group of people has a monopoly on God's grace. That was true in Jonah's day. That is true in our own day as well.
 - God responded to His prophet in verse 4 with a searching question: "Do you do well to be angry?" The form of the question is rhetorical in order to move Jonah to think about what he has just said. The question is a marvelous example of God's patience with his children. Instead of blasting Jonah with a

rebuke or breaking off the conversation altogether, God graciously and patiently reaches out to his prophet and encourages him to think. He asks Jonah, “Is it right, justifiable or good to be angry?”

- The word “angry” means *to burn or be kindled*. The root of this word has previously occurred in 3:9 and 4:1. There is a righteous indignation of the Lord and of believers. Paul speaks to this in Eph. 4:26. However, that is not what we see in Jonah. His anger is out of place. His anger is wrong. God tries to help His prophet understand that he should have compassion for all people, even those he may not naturally be inclined to like or care for. Jonah pities self. The Lord pities sinners. Seeing Nineveh destroyed would have made Jonah happy. Seeing Nineveh spared has made God happy. The contrast between the heart of Jonah and the heart of God could not be more apparent.

II. Never Forget Why You Are Here. (4:5-8)

- In verse 5 there is a change of location. Jonah went out of the city. There he made himself a shelter, and sat under it in the shade, until he might see what would become of city. The text is silent about the lapse of time between verses 4 and 5. The text is silent in chapter 3 as to when the Lord determined he would relent and not destroy Nineveh. Some have speculated that this occurred at the end of the 40 days. Others have argued that it occurred immediately upon their repentance, which obviously took place almost instantaneously.
- Regardless of the time span, it is clear that Jonah hoped that God might still come around to his way of thinking. Jonah is convinced that he actually understands the overall situation better than God. The pride and arrogance of such a posture is

amazing, although we should not be too quick to throw stones at Jonah. It is often the case that in particular situations of life we, too, question God, and even draw the conclusion that we know a better way than does our Lord. God, however, had several lessons for His prophet; lessons we may profit from as well.

1. You are Not Here to Condemn. 4:5

- Jonah left the city and positioned himself outside of it. He had chosen not to respond to the Lord's question in verse 4. In stubborn silence, he simply walked away from the Lord and out of the city. How long Jonah was willing to wait and watch is not certain. It is possible that he planned to wait the entire 40 days to see if God might change His mind and destroy the city. Some believe that God would not have chastened Jonah for his anger before the end of the 40 days, and that Jonah would not have been angry before the end of the 40 days. While this may be true, it is not certain.
- Jonah was not at all happy at the turn of events, but he had not yet given up hope. Nineveh might revert again to its violence and experience God's judgment. God might come around to his way of thinking and realize that in the long run, the best thing he could do would be to destroy this people.
- Jonah positioned himself east of the city. This may be where his preaching tour ended. There may have been a place of higher elevation that would allow him to look over the city. Jonah built himself a shelter, booth or hut to provide partial shade over his head. This would have been a crude structure and would have provided little relief from the hot Assyrian sun. Wood would have been scarce in

this part of Mesopotamia. The shelter would have been built from stones, clay, brush or branches. It would not have been much of a roof!

- The Lord's question in verse 4 had been intended to encourage Jonah to examine himself. Condemnation of sinners is God's business, not ours. Jonah chose, rather, to examine the city. The word *see* is the same word that was used of God in 3:10. God had looked upon Nineveh's turning from sin with delight, but Jonah looked upon it and God's relenting with anger and disappointment. Jonah wanted to question God. Jonah wanted these horrible sinners judged and destroyed. Jonah forgot, we are not here to condemn. That is not our job.

2. You are Not Here to Be Comfortable. 4:6-8

- Verse 6 begins with another providential act of God. Then the Lord God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery, and so Jonah was very grateful for the plant. This is the only use of "Lord God" in the book of Jonah. It is a common combination in the Old Testament. The Lord had previously designated or provided a fish to save Jonah in 2:1. Here the Lord again acts benevolently on Jonah's behalf. Do you see the irony of the situation, the patience of Jonah's God with His prophet?
- Jonah's pitiful shelter, which he had made himself, was insufficient to alleviate his discomfort. God steps in and provides a plant to aid His prophet. At first glance, this act of grace by our Lord seems unusual. However, God has a lesson in mind for Jonah, and the provision of the plant will become readily apparent in short order.

- The nature of the plant has been a matter of some debate. The Hebrew word simply designates a plant, a vine. Most scholars believe the plant to have been the castor vine, a shrub with large leaves that was quite common in that part of the world. Others have argued that it was a gourd plant. Still others have argued that it was *elkeroa shrub* which grows in sandy places, had broad leaves and can grow quickly to great heights.
- The purpose of the plant was to ease Jonah's comfort. The vine accomplished its purpose. Jonah was very grateful (happy) about the vine. Literally, the text reads "Jonah rejoiced over the vine with a great rejoicing." He was not just happy; he was incredibly happy. The sudden presence and miraculous growth of this vine caused Jonah to experience an emotion of joy that is not present anywhere else in the book. For the first and only time, Jonah is happy.
- However, he is not happy Nineveh has been delivered. He is happy because of his own personal comfort. He had been relieved from the horrible heat of the Assyrian sun. For that, and that alone, he was grateful.
- The purpose of the plant, however, was to teach Jonah a lesson. Jonah's comfort would be short-lived. But as morning dawned the next day, God prepared a worm and damaged the plant so that it withered. The vine was here today and gone the next. God sovereignly sent a worm to destroy the plant that had brought Jonah pleasure. The exact nature of the worm is again unknown, although the black caterpillar is a likely candidate as it was plentiful in the region surrounding Nineveh. Destruction brought about by the worm was quick. Indeed, A cut worm can easily destroy the stem of a plant and bring about its demise immediately.

Combined with the effect of the intense heat and scorching sun, the plant would wither even without divine intervention. It is ironic to note that even though the theme of destruction is recurring in the book of Jonah, the only thing that was destroyed in the entire book was this plant.

- God continued the education process in the life of Jonah in verse 8. (Read). For the fourth time in the book, the word “prepared” has occurred. God prepared, He provided a great fish, a plant, a worm and now a vehement (scorching) east wind. Losing his precious shade was followed by an even more horrible experience for Jonah. Most Bible scholars identify this wind with the *Sirocco*. This wind is common in the near east. When it strikes, the temperature rises dramatically and the humidity drops quickly. It is a constant and extremely hot wind that contains fine particles of dust. It has been known to cause exhaustion, depression, feelings of unreality and bizarre behavior.
- There was also a scorching sun and the text says it beat on Jonah’s head. In Hebrew this is the same word that was used of the activity of the worm when it said that it damaged the plant (the word simply means “to strike”). It is a picturesque image of the sun striking or beating on the head of God’s prophet. Jonah is no longer a happy prophet! Jonah had been quite happy, but now his happiness was gone. Suddenly, a number of natural disasters, supernaturally orchestrated by God, have invaded his comfortable space, his comfort zone. He lost his sheltering plant. He was confronted with a scorching, hot wind. The sun began to attack and “box” his head. This was more than the prophet could endure and he grew faint. Jonah felt like his life was slipping away and so he again

decided that God should bring his life to an end. Life was no longer worth living from his perspective. Everything had, and was, going wrong. He simply could not take it any longer. Making an exit from this life was a far better option than to continue to endure the deliverance of Nineveh and the devastating events that now inflicted him.

Application: However, Jonah needed to learn what we have to learn: We are not here to be comfortable. God never promised this. God does not promote this. The Christian life is a life of service, a life of denial, a life of following Jesus as we deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Him.

III. Never Forget What Really Matters. (4:9-10)

- For the second time in chapter 4, God responded to Jonah's plea for death with a question. "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" Jonah responded to the Lord's question quickly and with an air of defiance. "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"

What do we learn now?

1. You Need To Have God's Perspective: The Stuff of This Life Matters Little.

4:9-10

- Jonah's value system has been turned upside down and God is trying to help him get his head back on straight. as we say. The question in verse 9 is identical to the one God asked in verse 4, with the exception of the last three words concerning the plant. By focusing the question on the plant, God calls attention to the issue in such as way as to cause Jonah to potentially condemn himself with his own words. That is exactly what the prophet did. In essence, he said, "I am so mad I

could die.” His strength was sapped and his emotions were raw. Spiritually he was in the pits. Jonah is not thinking clearly and he lashed out at God in a nonsensical manner revealing he still had much to learn. This plant had been important to Jonah. It was of great significance in his eyes. He loved it. It pleased him. He was furious that it was dead. He was not looking at life with eyes of the Lord.

- In the previous dialogue in chapter 4, Jonah had walked away from God (verse 5). This time the dialogue continues. Jonah again requests death. The Lord again responds with a question. However, the question is first preceded by several statements that will drive a stake into the heart of the angry prophet. “But the Lord said, you have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night.
- God addressed the issue and source of Jonah’s comfort: the plant. The Lord pointed out that Jonah had been concerned about something over which he had absolutely no involvement at all. Jonah did not tend to the plant as a gardener. Indeed, Jonah had not lifted a finger to make it grow. His compassion for the plant was inappropriate and out of place. His perspective was all messed up. He had no basis for making any claims regarding the plant. It had simply been a gift of God’s grace.
- In a sense, God is saying to Jonah, who are you to question me? It is clear, Jonah, that you neither understand me, nor do you trust me, neither do you have the right perspective.

2. You Need To Have God's Pity: The Souls of the Lost Matter Tremendously.

4:11

- The plant was not the issue at all. The issue was Nineveh. In verse 11 God addresses what was the heart of the matter. (Read v. 11).
- Pity, says Elizabeth Achtemeimer, is “to act with tears in our eyes.” Jonah was concerned about a plant. God was concerned about people. Jonah had neither created nor nurtured the plant. But God had created and nurtured the people of Nineveh. Was it not right that he would extend to them his mercy and his grace? Is it not our responsibility to love and care for the lost like our Lord?
- The 120,000 people mentioned in verse 11 has been a point of some debate. Some have assumed that it is a reference to the children or infants in the large city of Nineveh. On the most conservative estimate, this would suggest a population of well over 600,000 people. However, if Nineveh proper is in view, the population would have certainly been much less. In that context, the 120,000 would stand for the entire population of the city.
- The phrase “who do not know their right hand and their left” would be a reference to the moral inability of the people of Nineveh. They were so far removed from God that they had difficulty discerning that which was good from that which was evil. Morally, they were bankrupt. Morally, ethically and spiritually they were naïve, helpless and pitiful. This in no way would indicate they were innocent and therefore not responsible for their actions. In light of the threatened judgment of God, this is certainly not the case. It is simply a fact that because of their distance

from the true revelation of God, here was a people immersed in moral confusion and uncertainty.

- However, they were still a people created in the image of God and a people for whom God had great love and concern. Nineveh needed God's gracious compassion, a compassion that extended even to the domestic animals.
- God informed Jonah that he neither created nor sustained the plant about which he was so greatly concerned. However, the people of Nineveh were the handiwork of God's creative genius. One hundred and twenty thousand were not capable of clear moral discernment. God, who knows when a sparrow falls from heaven, is even concerned about the cattle. Jonah's perspective and Jonah's pity was not what it should be because it was not the same as his God's. Lost people matter to God. Indeed, they matter a lot.

Conclusion

- Following the object lesson of the plant, the book simply ends. Jonah is confronted with a question he must answer. We are confronted with a question we must answer. The question is the same for all of us. Will I have a heart for the souls of lost people like my God, or will I have a heart for the souls of lost people like disobedient Jonah? The fact that Jonah relayed or recorded the events of this book, which are certainly humiliating and embarrassing to himself, would suggest strongly that he was brought to conviction and repentance by the Word of the Lord. Jonah's silence at the end of this book, in a real sense, speaks his quiet acceptance.
- Amanda Berry Smith lived from 1837-1915. A black girl born into the barbarism of slavery, she met the Savior and served him faithfully. Following the death of her husband and

youngest child, she became a missionary and ministered in the most needy parts of America, England, Ireland, Scotland, Africa and India. Reflecting on the souls of lost men and women she said, “How few there are that are willing to make any sacrifice to secure the freedom of souls that Jesus so freely offers...Lord, help me, and I will go for Thee. Tell me what Thou dost want me to do.”

- Methodist evangelist Sam Jones (1847-1906) well said, “If I had a thousand tongues, they should all talk of Christ; a thousand hands, they should all work for Christ; a thousand feet, I’d put them all in the way of heaven.”
- Lost people matter to Jesus. He died for everyone. Lost people should, they must, matter to us. Eternity is too long, heaven and hell too real. Let’s not forget why we are here. Let’s not forget what really matters. It’s souls! It’s souls! It’s souls!