

Jonah 1:1-17 (1984 NIV)
Overcoming the Sense of Unfairness

Introduction

The prophet Jonah lived during the 8th century B.C. His name means “dove”, symbolising peace and gentleness.

- But we have a different picture when we think of the name “Jonah” today.
- The Oxford Dictionary defines “Jonah” as one who is to be sacrificed lest he brings bad luck.
- So, a “Jonah” is some kind of a born-loser; one who is always on the wrong end; one who is always victimised for the advantage of others; one who will tend to cry out, “Unfair!”

Indeed, the Jonah in our text today fits better into the mould of a born-loser rather than a match-winner.

- In the Book of Jonah, we see how the compassion of God for the Ninevites stands in direct contrast to the complaints of Jonah against the Ninevites.
- God wants the wicked city of Nineveh saved compassionately, but Jonah wants it destroyed completely.
- God pursues Jonah because He wants to use Jonah, but Jonah flees from God because He does not want to be used by God.
- So, Jonah pays his own fare to run away from God, but he ends up in the belly of a great fish.
- He pays his fare to a wrong destination—what a born-loser!

Yes, we see Jonah very much at the wrong end. He has every good reason to cry out, “God, this is not fair!”

I wonder if some of us here are feeling somewhat like Jonah today.

- We feel like a born-loser.
- We feel as if we are always at the wrong end of things.
- We feel as if God is pressurising us to do things we don’t like or agree with.
- We feel like shouting, “God, this is not fair!”

As we look at Jonah 1 today, we want to try and glimpse at the heart of God, and learn what is in there to help us deal with that cry of unfairness in our own hearts.

I. Jonah 1 opens with God expressing His love to an unlovable people.

Verse 2 tells us the call of God to Jonah: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

Wickedness is not compatible with a holy God. The wickedness of Nineveh is recorded for us in the Book of Nahum.

- They plot evil against God’s holiness.
- They exploit the helpless.
- They commit cruelty in war.
- They worship idols.
- They approve of prostitution and witchcraft.

All their wickedness has come up before God—literally, it means the stench of their evil has risen to the nostrils of God, and it stinks!

God called Jonah to call that city to repentance lest it be destroyed out of existence. But Jonah resented that very possibility of the Ninevites being saved and spared by God. Why?

- This is because of his Hebrew bias and hatred towards the Ninevites.
- Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire at that time.
- The Assyrians were the major enemies of Israel—they conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. and deported the local people to Assyria.

Thus, Jonah wanted these enemies destroyed. To him, they deserved no part in God’s grace, love, and mercy. Indeed, Jonah resented God’s call to preach repentance to these people who were so much hated by himself.

- His Hebrew enmity towards the Ninevites made him protest, “No way! It is not fair to save and spare them!”
- His Hebrew pride and prejudice towards the Ninevites made him protest, “No way! We are the chosen and favoured people of God, not them!”

Often times, when the will of God clashes with our own human will, we tend to protest, “Lord, no way! It is not fair!”

This resentment in Jonah stirred him to arise and go, not to Nineveh but away from Nineveh. Verse 3 tells us: “But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.”

- Tarshish is believed to be at the extreme western end of the then known world, while Nineveh was at the eastern end.
- This implies that Jonah was trying to run as far away as possible from God’s call in the opposite direction—he ran away to Timbaktu!

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- He was so determined to run totally out of God's will in this matter.
- He did not want the Ninevites to hear God's call of repentance to them.
- He did not want them to ever turn away from their wickedness, and be spared from the judgement of God.

Indeed, the call of God and the reaction of Jonah to that call speak clearly of two different ways.

- One, God's way is to love even His enemies (those whose wickedness is against His holiness), and to give them a chance to repent; to be saved and spared from His judgement.
- Two, Jonah's way is to hate his enemies and give them no chance to be saved and spared—they must be completely destroyed.

To be fair to Jonah, he was only being very human to run away from God's call and to hate these wicked Ninevites. A description of the ancient city of Nineveh reads:

Nineveh was a corrupt city of blood. Assyria's cruelty is amply documented on unearthed cuneiform tablets. Assyrian kings even boasted of their cruelty. Prisoners were impaled alive, flayed, beheaded, or dragged to death with ropes attached to rings that pierced their bodies. They were blinded by the king's own hand and hung by their hands or feet to die slowly. Others had their brains beaten out or their tongues torn out and were left to bleed to death. Still others had the bleeding heads of the slain tied around their necks while waiting their turn to be tortured.

(<https://israelmyglory.org/article/ninevehs-demise-nahum-31-19/#:~:text=Nineveh%20was%20a%20corrupt%20city,rings%20that%20pierced%20their%20bodies>)

It is important to note that God called Jonah to the Ninevites to preach against their wickedness, AS WELL AS to offer them the prospect of forgiveness.

- Forgiveness here does not deny the past wrong.
- God did not forget the stench of wickedness that came up to Him from Nineveh.
- But He didn't allow this to stand in the way of a new start for Nineveh.
- Indeed, the miracle of forgiving is the creation of a new beginning.
- Someone once said that God invented forgiveness as a way of keeping alive His relationship with those who have wronged Him.
- If there was no forgiveness from God, there would be no hope for Nineveh.
- If there is no forgiveness from God today, there will be no hope for relationship with God; no hope for any new beginning with God.

Today, we live in an environment where competition of some kind is inevitable.

- Yes, healthy competition is desirable because it pushes us to improve and progress.
- On the flip side, competition often heightens contention in which one must win and the other must lose.
- Unfortunately, when winning and losing come into the picture, the best of friends can become the worst of enemies.
- And the loser may end up protesting, “It is not fair!”

What do we do when we are the ones feeling like a born-loser today?

- People have hurt us, pained us, and wronged us.
- Worst still, God seems to be so full of grace towards these who have done us harm when we ourselves are desiring so much their downfall.

In times like these when events and people seem to be against us, and even God Himself does not seem to be on our side, God is perhaps teaching us to seek His power to overcome evil with good; to claim His power to love even those unlovable to us, rather than to cry, “It is not fair!”

I believe God’s call to Jonah is more than a missionary call to bring His forgiving grace to people lost in sin like the Ninevites. I believe it is also a personal challenge to Jonah to claim God’s power to love and forgive his enemies (the hated Ninevites); to walk in step with Him and stop crying, “It is not fair!”

Augustine, one of the early church fathers, once said: “To love those who love you is only human, but to love those who hate you is truly divine.”

I know of someone whose life was once shattered when he caught his wife in an adulterous relationship with another man. In his pain and bitterness, he divorced his wife. In his shame and grief, he left Singapore to start life anew in England. There, he came to know the LORD and experienced His transforming grace.

Some years later, he visited Singapore and located his ex-wife who by then had married the other man. When he met both of them, he said these words with all grace, love, and mercy, “In the name of Jesus, I forgive both of you, and I wish you both well.”

Perhaps, the LORD is also calling you and me to say to someone or some people, “In the name of Jesus, I forgive you and I wish you well.”

- God is calling you and me to stop crying, “It is not fair!”
- God wants you and me to realise that the biggest loser in the “get even” game is the one who does not learn to forgive in the name and with the love of Jesus Christ

Thus, we see Jonah 1 opens with God expressing His love to an unlovable people. It is a message for Jonah to proclaim, as well as a lesson for him to learn. Just as God tempered His dealing with Nineveh's wickedness with a measure of His grace, love, and mercy, we see Him tempering His dealing with Jonah's stubborn disobedience with a measure of His own stubborn love.

Moving on, we see how ...

II. Jonah 1 closes with Jonah being held by the stubborn love of God.

Verse 4 reads: "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up."

Jonah was fast asleep on board his runaway ship, oblivious to the trouble that he had brought to the sailors. You can say that he was asleep in his own stubborn disobedience.

And we see this stubbornness coming out very strongly in v. 12.

12 "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

- When the sailors asked him what they should do to calm the storm, he told them to throw him into the raging sea.
- Jonah knew that it was his fault, yet he didn't seem remorseful—he would rather die than to do God's will and obey His call to go to Nineveh.
- He would rather choose to be dead than to see the city of Nineveh be saved and spared from destruction.
- "Obey God? Not over my dead body!" he protested.

In contrast, the pagan sailors were better examples of God fearers than the prophet of God. What an irony!

- They tried to row back to shore so as to keep Jonah alive (v. 13).
- They cried out to the LORD (i.e. Jonah's God) in their distress (v. 14).
- They feared the LORD and offered a sacrifice to Him when the sea became calm (v. 16).

Their God-fearing attitude and actions were in stark contrast to Jonah's stubborn disobedience to God's call for him to go to Nineveh.

- "It is not fait!" was his shout of disobedience to God.
- To him, the hated Ninevites must not be spared.
- Jonah prided himself on being a worshipper of the true God of heaven and earth (v. 9), yet the pagan sailors were a better example of fearing God—what a sad irony!
- He wanted the Ninevites to be destroyed by running away so that they would not be able to hear God's message of repentance, but his flight led him to face death in the raging sea.

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- God was seeking for people to repent, but Jonah was seeking for people to take revenge.
- When Jonah refused to go God's way and sought to go his own way instead, he became the biggest loser of all.
- When he stubbornly carried that hatred and grudge against the Ninevites, he became the one who was hurt the most.

Indeed, may we also pause to give ourselves this reminder—i.e. when our cry of “It is not fair!” is making us stubbornly vindictive in attitude and action, we are the ones who get hurt the most. Just like Jonah, we will be the biggest losers.

When stubborn Jonah was thrown into the raging sea, he went down and down the watery depth.

- Then we see something more stubborn arising.
- We see the stubborn love of God holding up Jonah—he was not dead in the depth of the sea, but alive in the belly of a great fish for three days and three nights (v. 17).
- Some have dismissed this part of the biblical record as “fishy” fiction.

But I believe there is nothing fictitious about it. This is simply because Jesus Himself referred to this episode, thus authenticated it when He said in Matt. 12:39-41—“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.”

And I also hold on to authenticity of this episode as a truth of great encouragement—i.e. when we seem to be sinking and sinking because of our own stubborn disobedience, the LORD is still holding us up as we fall.

- God's stubborn love had not given up on Jonah in spite of his stubborn disobedience.
- There was hope for him as God held him up in the belly of a great fish.
- In the same way, there is hope for us even in our own disobedience because God still holds us up in the grip of His almighty hand.

Jonah saw no sense of fairness in preaching to the hated Ninevites.

- He chose to go his own way rather than God's way.
- He ended up sinking into the depths of the sea until God held him up in the belly of a great fish.

Similarly, our cry of “It is not fair!” can lead us to go our own way instead of God’s way.

- Our own way can lead us into troubled waters just like Jonah who ended up sinking deep into the sea.
- However, we can take heart because we can never sink so low that it is impossible for us to come up again—not because we are able to lift ourselves up, but God is always able to hold us up.
- And if God has not given up on us, let us then not give up on ourselves; let us stop being stubbornly disobedient to God, and start being submissively obedient to Him.

Conclusion

As we have examined Jonah 1 today, there are at least two things about the heart of God that we have learnt that will help quieten down that cry of unfairness in our own hearts.

- One, God will punish if He must; yet He desires more to dispense His grace, love, and mercy.
- Two, if we are to love ourselves and others as God has loved us, we need to seek God’s help to live out that same spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness, especially if we are to overcome the sense of unfairness or injustice in us.

Are you feeling like Jonah today?

- Events, people, and even God all seem to team up against you.
- And you feel like crying out aloud, “It is not fair!”
- Jonah’s Hebrew pride and prejudice towards the Ninevites led him to his stubborn disobedience towards God, and he was unwilling to love and forgive the hated Ninevites.

“Love your enemies, forgive those who hurt you, overcome evil with good”—what a lofty virtue to obey and live out indeed.

- But it is possible when we recognise our poverty in spirit and look up to God for His enabling.
- The Lord Jesus had gone that way before when He cried out on the Cross not long before He breathed His last—His cry then was not “Father, this is not fair!”; His cry then was “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

Let’s seek the LORD to so help us as we obey Him and live to overcome whatever sense of unfairness or injustice that is troubling you and me today.

Amen!