

Life Group Lesson

Life Hurts, Christmas Heals • Week of December 18

Introduction

Have you ever been so angry with someone, so filled with bitterness and resentment that you wanted to see their demise? This is a tough place to find yourself, especially if you have professed faith in God and been a mouthpiece for God. Jonah, son of Amitttai, found himself here when God called him to speak truth to a people he hated. Jonah was a true prophet of the LORD and God sent him to speak God's word to the people of Israel—prophecies that were fulfilled. For example, we read of a time in the Old Testament when, although Israel's kings were evil, the LORD worked good for His people despite ungodly leadership –

*“Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash, began to rule over Israel in the fifteenth year of King Amaziah's reign in Judah. Jeroboam reigned in Samaria forty-one years. He did what was evil in the LORD's sight. He refused to turn from the sins that Jeroboam son of Nebat had led Israel to commit. Jeroboam II recovered the territories of Israel between Lebo-hamath and the Dead Sea, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had promised through **Jonah son of Amittai**, the prophet from Gath-hepher”*
(2 Kings 14:23-25).

Here Jonah was faithful. Yet, some time later when God called Jonah to the great city of Nineveh, Jonah went in the opposite direction to get away from God. This time Jonah did not want to obey God's word, ironically, because he knew that the LORD would indeed fulfill the prophecy. Jonah did not want to preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh because, if they actually humbled themselves and repented, they would receive and experience God's mercy just like God's people, Israel. And Jonah did not want that. He hated Nineveh. We read in Scripture how the Assyrian empire was ruthless and threatened Israel and Judah under rulers such as Shalmaneser III, Sennacherib, and Tiglath-peleser. Thus, the Assyrians struck fear in numerous nations, with influence stretching well into the region of Palestine.

Background

The Assyrian empire lasted from 900 to 600 BC and grew through warfare aided by new technology such as iron weapons. Assyria was a massive bully during the days of Israel's and Judah's kings, such as Jehoash and Jeroboam II of Israel, and Hezekiah of Judah. However, Assyrian rule weakened at one particular low point as a result of failed leadership (circa 755 BC)—the precise time God sent Jonah to preach

a message of repentance to people he loathed. We should never underestimate God's willingness to forgive and receive even our enemies; perhaps the reason Jesus said to pray for your enemies (Matthew 5:44) and always be ready to forgive your brothers from the heart (Matthew 18:21-22,35).

As we read the text, put yourself in Jonah's shoes. Think of someone (or people) you despise for whatever reason. It could be nationalistic, like Jonah; or deep personal hurt, such as the betrayal of a spouse, close friend, business colleague; perhaps sexual or verbal abuse as a child or young adult, slander that slandered your integrity. Imagine God telling you: “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are” (Jonah 1:1). Who is your Nineveh?

Reading the Text

Read Jonah 1:1-17, 2:10, 3:1-10, 4:1-4

1. What is the Holy Spirit saying to you?
2. What are you going to do about it?
3. How can we help you?

Reflection

We are commanded to walk in forgiveness. And as one pastor on our teaching team has said, “You can't fake forgiveness.” God sees the heart. Yet, because Christ has forgiven us, we can help us forgive others *from the heart*. When we choose to keep company with bitterness and resentment, we are headed in the opposite direction of God – much like Jonah when he bought a ticket and got on a ship headed for Tarshish. An unforgiving spirit will eventually lead us into the jaws of death. Take a moment. Are you harboring anger in your heart toward someone? The Lord sees all and He knows what they have done to offend you. Yet, the Lord also wants to release you from that offense you carry. Letting go of resentment will set you free from death.

Thankfully, just as God spared Jonah and gave him a second chance, God gives us a second chance to walk in obedience. When Jonah proclaimed God's message: “Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!” – the people actually believed

God's warning and humbled themselves by wearing sackcloth, fasting and prayer. The king stepped down from his throne and ordered that everyone (even animals) fast and wear clothes of mourning; the king of Nineveh called everyone to pray and stop their violence. He said, "Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change His mind and hold back His fierce anger from destroying us" (Jonah 3:9). Think about it: For a brief moment in Assyrian history, at a national low point – God showed mercy. Many Assyrians (the people of Nineveh) came to know God as Lord and Savior.

In Closing—

Jonah did not share the heart of God, do you? If you have ever been on the receiving end of God's mercy, you must also be glad when others repent and receive God's mercy. Anger, hatred, bitterness, resentment will not be allowed in heaven. You and I must place all offense into the nail-scarred hands of Jesus. He alone can forgive, heal and restore those who humble themselves before Him. Close by reading together –

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

Close in a Time of Prayer asking:

How can I pray for my fellow Life Group participants this week?

One Year Bible Readings

December 18: Habakkuk 1:1-3:19, Revelation 9:1-21, Psalm 137:1-9, Proverbs 30:10
December 19: Zephaniah 1:1-3:20, Revelation 10:1-11, Psalm 138:1-8, Prov. 30:11-14
December 20: Haggai 1:1-2:23, Revelation 11:1-19, Psalm 139:1-24, Proverbs 30:15-16
December 21: Zechariah 1:1-21, Revelation 12:1-17, Psalm 140:1-13, Proverbs 30:17
December 22: Zechariah 2:1-3:10, Revelation 13:1-18, Psalm 141:1-10, Prov. 30:18-20
December 23: Zechariah 4:1-5:11, Revelation 14:1-20, Psalm 142:1-7, Prov. 30:21-23
December 24: Zechariah 6:1-7:14, Revelation 15:1-8, Psalm 143:1-12, Prov. 30:24-28

LIFE HURTS, CHRISTMAS HEALS

Text: Jonah 1: 1 – 17, Ch 2: 10, Ch 3: 1 – 10, Ch 4: 1 – 3

Plain Truth:

Today's _____ can become tomorrow's _____.

The Book of Jonah tells two things about the nature of God:

1. Christ Mission (Christmas) is _____: rightly related to God and rightly related to _____.
2. _____ is _____ to Jesus so it _____ be to us.

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