

Staying on Mission

Jonah 4

Dr. John Goodenough and his team at the University of Texas recently filed a patent application for a new kind of battery they have been developing which if it works as promised, will be so cheap, lightweight and safe that it will revolutionize electric cars and could end the era of petroleum-fueled vehicles which could profoundly change the environment. His announcement caused quite a stir because not only is Dr. Goodenough 94 years old but he has done this before. In 1980, at age 57, he coined the lithium-ion battery which shrank power into a tiny package. Our laptops, phones and electric cars are still using that battery, but Dr. Goodenough has long been bothered by the shortcomings of his invention and driven by the need to do better – and to completely eliminate our dependence upon fossil fuels, he has continued to work on improving his invention. In fact, nobody on earth has been thinking about energy problems longer than Dr. Goodenough and because he has been working on them for so long, he just keeps getting better and better at solving them. That's true of most people who are successful in their field. There are few overnight successes. Accomplishment is the result of a persistent effort over a long period of time; of keeping at it through failure after failure until we finally figure out how to do what we want to do. I know that's certainly been true for me. I'm just beginning to understand what following Jesus in His mission really means; and I've been at this for 50 years. That's why it's sad for me to see people who drop out of the mission; who served Jesus at one time but have stopped; whose best years in ministry are not ahead of them but behind, back when they were in college or single. But once they got married, got a job and a family and got swept up in the demands of everyday life Christ's mission for their life was forgotten. And I wonder how much further along we would be in accomplishing Christ's mission if everybody who started was still running the race; how much more we would know and be able to do. How do we stay on mission? How do we keep getting better and better at what Jesus has called us to do? That's the question as we look at the fourth chapter of the book of Jonah.

Today we finish a series in the Old Testament book of Jonah we entitled, *Jonah and the Runaway Bride*. The book of Jonah isn't just a character study of Jonah; it is a story about God's Bride; Israel in the Old Testament, and the Church in the New and how God's bride is always running away from Him and from the mission He has given her. Jonah is us. When God sends him east to Ninevah, the capital of Assyria, Jonah goes west, buying a ticket to Tarshish on the western edge of the Mediterranean, as far from Ninevah and from God as he can go. When God sends a storm to stop him, while everybody else on board is praying to their gods for help, Jonah goes to bed. God is the last person he wants to talk to. When the crew learns that Jonah is responsible for the storm and they ask him what they should do, instead of agreeing to go to Ninevah, Jonah tells them to throw him overboard. He would rather drown than go to Ninevah. Are there things you know God wants you to do that you would rather die than do? Even when Jonah is drowning, he refuses to pray. It's only when he's stuck in the belly of the fish God sends to save him from drowning; that he realizes he's run out of options, he finally humbles himself before God. And that's where some of you are this morning. You've hit bottom. You're stuck and the only way you're going to get out of your predicament is to turn to God. Once Jonah prays, God commands the fish to vomit Jonah out on to a beach and God speaks to Jonah a second time, telling him once again to go to Ninevah. Aren't you glad God is the God of the second chance...and of the 102nd chance and that He refuses to give up on us? Jonah finally goes to Ninevah to preach the very short sermon God gives him to preach. "In 40 days, Ninevah will be destroyed." Jonah didn't even need notes for that sermon but the entire city of over 500,000 Assyrians turns to God and repents; and that's where we pick up the story this morning. The fourth chapter of Jonah is a great explanation of why so many people who were once on mission with God have abandoned that mission. In vs. 1-3 we see Jonah's anger and in vs. 4-11 we see God's answer to Jonah's anger.

Let's begin back in chapter 3 verse 11. "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way; then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it. But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry." When God sees the Ninevites repent and put aside their wicked deeds and cry out to Him for mercy, He relents about the destruction He said He would bring upon Nineveh – which was the reason He sent Jonah to Ninevah in the first place. If God had wanted to destroy the Assyrians, He would have just done it. He sent Jonah to warn them so that they would repent and He could spare them; so

Jonah accomplished his mission. But when Jonah sees the destruction of Nineveh averted, he gets mad. What God wants isn't what Jonah wants because what God values isn't yet what Jonah values; and that's what chapter 4 is about; what we value, because we will only stay on mission if we value what Christ values. Jonah has seen incredible success. God used him to turn a city of blood-thirsty, immoral, idol-worshipping pagans the size of Berkeley, Oakland, San Leandro, Hayward, Alameda, and Moraga to God. And God did it in a single day. Jonah should be in the Prophets Hall of Fame. No other prophet ever turned an entire city to God - let alone a pagan city - in a single day. For a prophet, Nineveh is the Superbowl, the World Series, and the US Open all rolled into one. Yet success looks like failure to Jonah because what God values isn't what Jonah values. How do I know that? Jonah gets mad and *"He prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. Jonah tells God, 'I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.'" Aren't you glad that God is slow to anger? Imagine what the world would be like if God got angry as quickly as we get angry. I don't think there would be any people left in the world; just little piles of ashes. But God is extremely slow to anger and extremely quick to forgive, gracious and compassionate – always treating us better than we deserve. And Jonah knows it. But did he really? Jonah knew about God but he obviously didn't know God because he doesn't share God's values. What made God glad made Jonah mad. That's why he prays, "I knew You didn't want to destroy these guys and that if there was a way to save them, You'd find it. That's why I ran away to Tarshish - to avert this very thing; to keep from giving You what You want because it was the last thing I wanted." "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."* Jonah and God are definitely not on the same page as far as Nineveh is concerned. Jonah expected God to be merciful to him but not to the Assyrians. Maybe Jonah was being patriotic. Assyria was a major threat to Israel and in fact invaded Israel 20 years later, killing much of the population and scattering the rest to the four corners of the earth, never to return until 1947. Or maybe Jonah hoped the destruction of Nineveh would be an object lesson for Israel. Maybe Jonah has already written his homecoming sermon. "You should have seen what God did to Nineveh. It's gone, there's just a hole in the ground. He gave them 40 days. He's given you 400 years. The clock ran out for them and it's running out for you unless you repent." Or maybe Jonah was embarrassed. He had preached to Nineveh exactly what God told him to say, "In 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed," and if Nineveh is still around 40 days later, Jonah looks like an idiot. We don't know why Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. But we do know that the thing Jonah feared most - the thing he ran away to Tarshish to avoid - has happened. And Jonah is so angry that he wants to die – which tells me that depression is often the result of anger.

So let me ask you a question. Are you mad at God this morning? Unresolved anger is almost always the result of having our plans or goals frustrated and whenever I get mad, the question I need to ask myself is "What do I want that I'm unable to get?" Maybe I'm stuck in a job I can't stand and I pray and pray for a new job but God doesn't answer. Maybe I like my job, but I watch others moving up while my career seems to be on hold. Maybe I'm single and waiting for that right woman. Or I want better health, or a baby, or a new house, or more money, or my kids to behave, or my spouse to be nice - but whatever it is that I want, I'm not getting it. And so I carry around this floating anger and irritability right below the surface that suddenly explodes over the most trivial situations and this low grade depression that makes me cranky and negative and quick to complain - all because I'm mad at God. Why is Jonah mad at God? The same reason we get mad at God; we don't want what God wants. We don't value what God values. What's important to God isn't important to us. And as long as what I want is at odds with what God wants, I'm going to be an angry man because God will always do what is right in His sight and not what is right in mine. And so if I'm going to be at peace with God and conquer my anger, I need to have my desires changed and my values clarified. I need to learn to want what God wants, to have my will conformed to His - which is the next lesson God teaches Jonah as God answers Jonah's anger.

Well, after that prayer, it's amazing that Jonah's still standing. First he runs away so that God won't save the Ninevites, and when he finally accomplishes the mission God gave him, Jonah gets mad at God for saving them. Yet God never gives up on Jonah – and by the way, He never gives up on you either. In fact, three out of the four chapters of this book are about what God is doing IN Jonah; only one chapter is about what God does THROUGH Jonah. That's why when Jonah gets mad at God, God doesn't zap Jonah, or give up on Jonah. God just takes Jonah

back to class. It's time for another lesson. In chapter one, God used a storm and a big fish to teach Jonah. In chapter four, God uses a plant, a worm, and a very hot day. Let's see how God answers Jonah's anger. *"The Lord said, 'Do you have good reason to be angry?'"* That's a good question to ask yourself when you're mad at God. "Do I have a good reason to be angry? Is my anger justified under the circumstances?" It's a powerful question because - as we'll see in a minute - the question God asks Jonah holds the key to staying on mission when God doesn't do what we want Him to do. *"Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city."* Jonah refuses to answer God's question. He just sulks; probably because he knows the only right answer is, "No I really don't have a good reason to be angry. You're God and You will do whatever is right in Your sight." But Jonah's not about to say THAT and so he walks out into the desert east of Nineveh, makes himself a little lean-to, and waits to see what God will do to the city. Now if Jonah knows Nineveh has repented and that God isn't going to destroy it, why does he hang around Nineveh? Why not go home? I think Jonah is hoping God may still see things his way. Don't we do the same thing? God says "no" to something we really want, but instead of accepting that "no," and moving forward, we keep hoping that God will change His mind, that if we nag Him long enough, or stay mad at Him long enough, He'll give in and give us what we want. After all, it worked with Mom and Dad. So Jonah sulks in hope that he will see God destroy Nineveh. *"So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant."* Jonah's little makeshift shelter doesn't offer much protection from the hot desert sun as he waits to see what will happen to Nineveh and God intervenes again in Jonah's life. He sent a storm, He sent a fish, and now he sends a fast growing plant to provide shade - which makes Jonah extremely happy. Have you noticed that Jonah's a pretty emotional guy? He's really up when things go his way, and he's really down when things don't. Right now, he's enjoying the shade and happy with God. *"But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, 'Death is better to me than life.'" God appoints a plant one day and a worm and a hot day the next. Some days things go well while others not so much - yet all the details of our lives are in God's hands who is working them all for our good. Yesterday God made Jonah comfortable and Jonah was happy with God. Today God makes Jonah uncomfortable and Jonah is mad again. But instead of just getting up and finding some other shade - or walking back into Nineveh, Jonah sits in the hot sun and sulks even though he's about to pass out from heat stroke. "If this is the way You are going to treat me, I'll just die and then You'll be sorry."* *"Then God said to Jonah, 'Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?'"* The same question He asked yesterday, "Is your anger about the plant justified?" And this time Jonah answers. *"And he said, 'I have good reason to be angry, even to death.'" "You treat me this way and then you ask why I'm mad?"* And it's at this point that God explains the lesson of the plant, the worm, and the hot day. *"Then the Lord said, 'You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.'" God says, "You're mad at me because of a plant. It wasn't even your plant. You didn't cultivate it or cause it to grow. It was just a plant, here today, gone tomorrow - and yet now you're ready to die because it is gone. 'Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, (meaning children under the age of 4) as well as many animals?'" God says, "Jonah, you care more about a dying plant than you care about a dying people. You're upset about the death of a plant, yet you are unfazed by the death of an entire city, full of innocent children and animals. Doesn't that strike you as a little strange? But of course, the plant benefitted you while the Assyrians do not. I'm concerned about people and you can't even understand that concern, because you don't value the things I value. You only value what benefits you personally."* Even though Jonah went to Nineveh and preached, he didn't do it because he was committed to God's heart or to what God values. Jonah is still more concerned about his own comfort, his own agenda, and his own desires than he is about what God wants. Spiritual maturity is not just DOING what God wants us to do. Spiritual maturity is thinking like God thinks, wanting what God wants and feeling like God feels. And just as God used a hot day, a fast growing plant and a hungry worm to show Jonah what was in his heart, so God uses the circumstances of our lives to show us what's important to us - and how different our heart still is from His great heart.

The tale of Jonah ends with another unanswered question; *"Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"* I think that's because the reader is supposed to answer that question. Who does

God love that I don't? Do you as God's child know that God is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity - are you concerned about lost people? Are you concerned about the same things your Father is concerned about? Here's the lesson for the day. Until I see what God sees, I won't keep doing what God says. Until I care about what God cares about, I won't stay on the mission He has given me for long. The reason people fail to stay on mission is because we don't genuinely care about what God cares about and when the mission stops serving our interests and starts costing us something, we'll bail out. You might assume that people become pastors because we want what God wants but at least for me, that has often not been the case. When I started Creekside, I wanted to reach people who weren't involved in church or who had given up on church or who didn't feel comfortable in traditional churches. And I believe that desire came from the God who continues to seek and to save the lost. But I also had another agenda which I barely even recognized in myself initially. I wanted to be known as a successful pastor. I wanted to build a huge church and give seminars and write books about how I did it. I wanted recognition and admiration and I am so thankful to God that He didn't give me what I wanted because those desires didn't come from God but from my own wicked heart. And so I've seen a lot of plants and worms and hot days and arguments with God over the past 27 years. Why won't You make this church successful? Why won't You make it grow faster? Why won't You give me what I want? Now I know the answer; because I didn't want what God wanted; because I defined success differently than I defined success and I am so grateful that God didn't give me what I wanted. I was in love with building Sunday attendance. God wanted to build disciples of Jesus who would do what Jesus would do. I wanted to find the break through church growth strategy which would put Creekside on the map. God wanted us to simply imitate Christ by loving our neighbor. I was in love with accomplishments. God was in love with individuals. For me, people were the means to my goal; to God, people were the goal. I'm glad God is slow to anger and patient and didn't give up on Jonah or me but kept working on both of us. Jonah's greatest barrier to completing God's mission was Jonah; and the greatest barrier we face in our mission is us. That's why God will not be content until we not only are doing the right thing but are doing it for the right reason, until we think and feel the way He thinks and feels. We live in a very secular area of the United States - an area where a lot of people are skeptical about Christianity and about Christians. I used to think that if I could just discover the right strategy or the right argument, then we could really reach people for Christ. But Jesus has already given us our mission and His mission can't be improved upon. He gave us the Great Commandment: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And He gave us the Great Commission; to go and make disciples - more followers of Jesus and we can't fulfill the Great Commission unless we obey the Great Commandment. Unless we learn to love our neighbor in the same way as we love ourselves and in the same way that Jesus loves us, we'll find that most of our neighbors won't be interested in the gospel. Until I care about people the way God cares about people, my experience has been that most people won't be interested in the God I represent. That is why God is not just interested in using us; He's committed to making us like His Son.

So how does God change our heart toward people so that we care about what He cares about? For years I prayed that God would give me His heart for lost people and yet nothing changed in my heart. But how does God change Jonah's heart toward the Ninevites? God could have changed Jonah's heart toward Ninevah when he was still in Israel and skipped the ocean voyage, the storm and the fish - but He didn't. He sends Jonah to Ninevah and deals with Jonah's heart there. God sends Jonah to Ninevah - not only for the Ninevites' sake but for Jonah's sake because it is at Ninevah, Jonah has to confront his own selfishness and nationalism and racism and how far from God's heart his heart is. That tells me the only way I will develop God's heart for those who don't know Him yet is to be around the people who don't know Him yet and to really get to know them. God doesn't love humanity, He loves individuals and I can't experience His love for people until I get to know those people. That's why it's hard to love people from a distance. I pray regularly for my teammates on our swim team that God will draw them to Himself - but I don't do much more. When I get to the pool, I like to get my workout in and then move on to the next thing on my schedule. Some people in my lane hang around for a few minutes after the workout to chat, but I've got important things to do. Recently however I've realized that I can't love my neighbor unless I know my neighbor and so I committed myself to taking the initiative whenever I had the opportunity to find out more about people. So a couple of weeks ago as we finished our final set of sprints, instead of telling the guy I was swimming with to have a good day and leaving the pool immediately, I stayed in the water and asked him what he did for a living. I've been swimming with Tom for years and yet I never bothered to find out what he did. Tom told me all about his construction business and how he would like to retire soon but he doesn't have anybody to turn the

business over to and how he really cares about the people he builds for and wants that value to continue in the company and really opened up about things he was working through. I told him about going through a similar thing with the church as I was stepping down and my son was taking my place and the two year handoff we've been working on. And I felt not only a genuine camaraderie with him as another man in a similar season of life; I began to experience God's heart for Tom. I really began to care about him. I've know Tom for years but my heart toward him didn't begin to change until I took time to get to know him better. The moment I took the first step, I began to see Jesus at work in me. If we loved people the way Jesus loves people and the way Jesus has loved us, do you think it would change the way those who don't know Christ see Jesus? If Christians loved their neighbor as themselves, do you think that more people would want to know about Jesus? Should God not have compassion on the Bay Area, the great city in which there are so many who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals? If your answer to these questions is yes, then ask God to give you His great heart for people and then live as if He has.

So here's the lesson I learn from Jonah 4; to stay on mission, we have to see as God sees and to feel as God feels and value what God values. We don't love people to convert them; we love people because we're converted; because Christ is not only in us but is making us like Himself. It all gets down to this. Do you know that God is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity? Well, so did Jonah. Jonah knew about God but he didn't yet believe in the God he knew about. He was glad God had been the God of the second chance to him – but he didn't think God should be the God of the second chance to others – especially to Assyrians. It's not just about what we know; it's about what we believe and about who we trust. Do I really believe the gospel; that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life? Do I really believe that unlike Jonah, Jesus loves us because God loves us and that is why He laid down His life for us – living the life we failed to live so that God can credit His perfect record to all who put their faith in Him and dying the death we deserve to die, dying in our place and bearing our punishment on the cross so that God can pardon us? Just because I know that's true doesn't mean I believe it's true. If I don't believe that I need a Savior or that other people need a Savior and that Jesus is that Savior, it doesn't matter how long I've attended church, I don't really believe the gospel. And if that's where you find yourself this morning, today is the day of salvation. Ask Jesus to come into your life, forgive your sins and to give you a new heart; and then prepare to join Him in His mission to a dying world.

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