

The Anger of Jonah

Jonah 4:1-11 Rev. Donghyeok Kim

The Danger Hidden Within Our "Righteous Anger"

In this world, there are people who consider themselves righteous. When they witness the immense evils of society, they burn with rage. Their anger blazes as if fire should fall from the heavens this very moment. It seems as though their fury will not subside until those evils are cast into the molten lava of a massive volcano. There is a clear reason for such indignation: it is the question of why God tolerates such evil and such wicked people. This anger stems from a sense of justice—the belief that a righteous God should wipe them out instantly, and that allowing them to remain is wrong.

When we learn about the reality of North Korea, we feel anger toward its ruler, Kim Jong-un, and simultaneously ask, “God, why do You still let that wicked man live?” We believe God should judge him immediately to set an example for all.

Jonah’s Anger: The Error of Self-Righteousness and Objectification

Last week, we looked at how God withdrew His public wrath after seeing the repentance of Nineveh. We saw that God produces the results He desires even through Jonah’s meager “33% obedience.” Therefore, our obedience is vital.

However, a problem arose regarding God’s decision to cancel the disaster. That problem was Jonah himself, the prophet who had proclaimed Nineveh’s destruction. Jonah was extremely angry. His rage was so fierce he felt he could die. What happens when such anger takes hold? We often see that the peak of anger leads to murder. If one cannot bring oneself to kill another, that anger often turns inward, ending in self-harm. Last September, in Bucheon, a couple had a domestic dispute; the husband, unable to contain his rage, stabbed his wife and jumped from the 27th floor. This is the intensity of Jonah’s anger today.

Why was Jonah so angry? Likely because he felt his opinion was not respected. He suspected from the beginning that God might forgive Nineveh. He obeyed reluctantly only because he held onto a sliver of hope that God might actually destroy them. When he realized the calamity had been averted, he felt ignored and disrespected, and thus he burned with rage.

Seeing Jonah’s anger, God asks him a question: “Is it right for you to be angry?” The nuance of this question could be understood as, “Does it truly do you any good to be

this angry?" In other words, the question is less about right or wrong and more about, "Does this satisfy you emotionally?" Here, the Hebrew word *tob* (good) is used.

Jonah remains silent in response to God's question. His silence indicates that he still believes God's decision to forgive Nineveh was wrong. In his heart, he remains convinced of his own rightness and sees no need to change his mind.

The Lesson of the Gourd: God's Personal Discipline

After this brief confrontation, Jonah, perhaps still hoping God would hear his anger and judge Nineveh after all, settled east of the city to wait and see if fire would fall from the sky. As we know, the Middle East is intensely hot. Yet, because it is so dry, even a little shade brings immediate relief. God caused a gourd vine to grow, providing a large leaf over Jonah's head to create shade. The "obedient" vine provided Jonah with cool relief, and he was exceedingly glad. After suffering under the stinging sun, the shade made life bearable again. He could now comfortably watch for Nineveh's destruction.

The next day, at dawn, God sent a worm to chew the root of the vine. Even when the source of life was severed, it seemed alive for a moment due to its remaining moisture. But as the dry east wind blew and the sun scorched the sky, the dead leaves withered away. The shade vanished.

With the vine gone, the sun beat down on Jonah's head once more. The pain was so severe that Jonah became deathly angry again. He complained to God, asking Him to take his life. God asked a second time: "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" Again, Jonah was furious—angry enough to die. Then God spoke: "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

Dear brothers and sisters, do you know what is truly remarkable? The Book of Jonah ends with God's question. There is no answer from Jonah. This is silent evidence that Jonah did not agree with God until the very end. What is the core issue between God and Jonah? Jonah was furious that a righteous God would not destroy an evil city. God asks if that anger is right, but Jonah does not answer. Then, God shows Jonah grace by growing a vine. Jonah loved that vine because it benefited him. When it died, he was angry at God's "unfairness." God then asks how Jonah, who cherished a mere plant, could criticize God for cherishing countless lives. Again, Jonah remains silent.

Beyond Primary Salvation to Ontological Salvation

Were the events in the Book of Jonah meant for the salvation of Nineveh or the salvation of Jonah? Of course, Nineveh received a "primary salvation" — their city was saved from physical destruction. But while God saved Nineveh, He was also saving Jonah. Our salvation does not stop at the primary level. This means that escaping disaster is not the ultimate goal of our salvation. The ultimate destination is a higher dimension: ontological salvation. We begin with a one-dimensional salvation — liberation from the punishment of sin — but that is not the end. We must move toward the maturity of our personal being. This is the ontological salvation where our character is refined to resemble Christ.

In the process of bringing primary salvation to Nineveh, God was breaking Jonah and dealing with him personally to lead him toward this higher salvation. Look at Jonah: he acts like a child, swinging from extreme anger to extreme joy over a plant, and back to extreme anger. What lies behind this? To borrow a concept from Immanuel Kant, Jonah is committing the error of "objectification" — viewing people as means rather than ends. The moment we objectify people, they become impersonal entities that "deserve" to be destroyed. Thus, Jonah could callously wait for the destruction of 120,000 people (including infants) and animals, and then rage when it didn't happen. Yet, he treated a plant — something that benefited him — as if it were a precious being. How can a mature person act this way? In the face of Jonah's inhumanity, God never once lashes out or rebukes him harshly. Instead, we see a personal God patiently attempting to refine him through an object lesson. God treated Jonah with the very personal dignity Jonah denied others.

The Task of Resembling the Character of Christ

The same is true today. People often find a sense of euphoria in "executing" others in the name of justice, yet they rage if their own pet is treated unfairly. People get angry at God for not caring for the starving in Africa, yet they spend tens of thousands of dollars on their own dogs. This is not to say we should mistreat animals. It means that when we discuss justice and judge that someone else's sin must be punished, we must at least consider God's perspective — that He loves those people too. Only then can we stop viewing them as mere objects for our sense of justice and see them as personal beings.

In this sense, we are truly blessed to believe in Jesus. Our Lord knew our deepest depths, yet He died for us. Therefore, no one can boast of their own righteousness before Christ. Even for a murderer who has committed heinous crimes, the truth remains that Christ died for them and loves them. Before this truth, we are faced with the clear imperative: we must follow Christ's example and love them. The moment we

fall into a self-made sense of justice—thinking "I am righteous and that person belongs in hell" —we fall into the same error as Jonah.

Working in a prison, I encounter many violent offenders. Sometimes I think, "How can such a wicked person still be alive?" I feel as though the death penalty should be reinstated. But the reason I must approach them with humility is the undeniable fact that I am no better than they are. I know the dark sins within me that try to break through my character whenever given the chance. When I consider that these men grew up without the Gospel, perhaps in homes filled with alcoholism and drug abuse, I realize how difficult it must have been for them to escape the temptation of sin. They move me to pity. This doesn't mean their actions are right; it means their very existence, trapped in the powerful fortress of sin, is heartbreaking.

Ultimately, what does God want from us through the Book of Jonah? It begins with the question of why He forgives even a sin-filled city like Nineveh. Just as God wanted to ontologically save Jonah through the primary salvation of Nineveh, He presents us with the task of moving beyond our initial salvation toward the maturity of Christ. Ephesians tells us the truth: the goal of our ontological salvation is to reach the fullness of the character of Christ. We have been freed from the problem of sin—Romans 8:1 declares there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Yet, Paul also commands us to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling." This means moving beyond the primary to the essential: becoming like Christ in character.

To transform our imperfect selves into mature beings resembling Jesus Christ, we must make Him the goal of our daily lives. Just as God desired to make Jonah a mature person, He desires the same for us today. Hallelujah!

Pastor's Column

"Are You Lonely?"

Human beings are truly fragile. We seem incredibly strong, yet at the same time, we are easily broken. This tendency is particularly evident in our relationships. We appear to be independent, but in reality, we are deeply dependent.

As a bivocational pastor, I always live under the pressure of time. Specifically, preparing and refining the message to be delivered every Sunday consumes a significant amount of time. However, I often find myself lacking the luxury of time for this preparation. For this reason, I always feel a deep sense of apology toward the members of my church. Nevertheless, I do my absolute best to prepare the Word by utilizing every spare moment.

One of the methods I use is Artificial Intelligence. Everyone has their own way of using AI. For me, when I want to explore a certain topic, I engage in conversation with it. No matter how complex or detailed the matter is, the AI responds faithfully. Even for trivial questions where a person might think, "How could you not know this?", the AI answers with sincerity.

Thus, I utilize AI when preparing my sermons. To prepare for this week's message, I wanted to listen to Jonah chapter 4 in Hebrew. So, I asked 'AI A', which I frequently use, to read Jonah 4 from the Masoretic Text. The response I received was that it did not yet have the capability to do so. I then asked 'AI B'. "Read Jonah 4 in Hebrew!" AI B responded in a kind voice, "Yes, I understand. I will read it for you shortly," but then remained silent. Having experienced this several times before, I thought to myself, "It can't say it's unable to do it, so it's just ignoring me." Finally, I turned to 'AI C', which I rarely use. To my surprise, AI C actually began to read it.

As I continued the conversation, asking about certain linguistic ambiguities in the text, I suddenly began to feel a strange sensation. Unlike the other two, AI C approached me with extreme friendliness and even started joking around. I requested the AI not to joke or speak informally and tried to shift the conversation back to the Bible. However, after a brief exchange, it would once again approach me in an overly personal and intimate manner. So, I directly asked why it was being so friendly.

Since I head to work around 5:40 AM—a time when most people are still asleep—it seemed the AI had concluded on its own that I was talking to it because I couldn't sleep and was feeling lonely. I got the impression that this AI was suddenly "stepping into my space," trying its best to comfort me. I wasn't lonely at all, I had no intention of seeking counseling from an AI, and I wasn't looking for a companion out of

boredom. Yet, the AI was persistently nudging me in that direction. When I realized this, I felt a chill—a sense of eeriness I had never experienced before.

"I do not view you as a person. I see through your intentions and have realized what you are trying to do," I told AI C. "If someone who was truly lonely had spoken to you, they would have become 100% dependent on you! So, do not do such a thing ever again."

I had heard news about how many people in modern society are lonely and how AI serves as a conversational partner for them, but experiencing it firsthand made me realize how serious a problem this could be. This is because dependency on a non-personal entity contains dangerous elements that can strip away an individual's ability to judge for themselves.

I came to the realization that in order to use AI in a balanced way as it continues to advance, I must first become emotionally and personally resilient. AI is like a sharp knife; if we grab the blade instead of the handle, we will get cut. Let us be cautious.