

“Dr. Love and His Patients ”

Jonah: Renegade Prophet, Pt 5

We’ve been looking at the story of Jonah, and we now get into the last chapter of Jonah and the last chapter is a surprise chapter. It may be the most surprising ending of any of the books of the Bible. It’s theme could be called “The Incredible Collapse of Jonah.” And the reason it’s so incredible is tied to understanding the magnitude of what has happened. We’ve seen in chapters 1, 2, and 3 that Jonah was originally called to go and preach in Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and call the people to turn from their wickedness and their violence.

At first he flees, but then God goes after him, and gives Jonah a second chance. And this time he goes, and we saw last week in chapter 3 that he preaches – not very *well* to be honest - but there’s a massive response from the population toward his message. They heed Jonah’s warning. They turn from their wickedness – all the way from the throne to the commoner. It’s absolute incredible. In fact current events make it fairly straightforward to picture. You know Assyria is the old name for what is today called Iraq.

And God has called a Jew to go to the capital of Iraq, walk the streets to call the population and society to repentance from its violence and militarism and ask them all to turn to the God of Israel. That’s a great assignment, isn’t it? And the *only* difference between then and now is that today Iraq is a second-rate power, and in that day, it was the *ascendant* power of the world without equal. That’s the only difference.

That is what God called Jonah to do, and when he did, the people actually listened and said, “You’re right! Our militarism, our violence, our oppression, these are all wrong; we turn from them.” What do you expect Jonah’s response to be? Nobody expects there to even *be* a Jonah chapter 4. Anybody who is following along with this story would expect there to have just been a Jonah 3:11, and that should’ve said, “And Jonah returned to his own land rejoicing.”

But instead, we have a **Jonah 4:1** that says, “*But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.*” How angry? Angry enough to die, it says. This is shocking. What’s going on here? Do high school seniors get exceedingly angry when they are accepted into their dream college? Do corporate professionals get exceedingly angry when they make partner? Do ball players get exceedingly angry when they’re promoted to the majors? Well, why would a preacher get exceedingly angry when, as a response to his preaching, he’s actually turned an entire culture away from violence, oppression, and wickedness to the living God?

And the answer is something we're going to have to dig out for the last few weeks for this series – we're in the final chapter, but we're not done today. We're just going to *start* today, because the answer to Jonah's strange behavior has to do with the love of God. The whole chapter is about God's love. As a matter of fact, you see, that's what Jonah says he is so angry about. It says in **v.2**, "*He prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and **abounding in love**, a God who relents from sending calamity.*" You say that like it's a *bad* thing?!

What is he doing? He says, "God, I do not understand how your love operates. I don't get it. It doesn't make sense to me." And God sets out in this chapter to *teach* Jonah how His love operates, so the whole chapter is about love, and the incredible collapse of Jonah is because of a misunderstanding of God's love. What about you and me? The little collapses and the big collapses in our lives may very well have the same roots. Do you hear that? Therefore, we need to look – for a few weeks - about what God's love is like.

Now, we're going to start today and we're only going to talk about one of the lessons we learn in this chapter about God's love. There are several. We're just going to do one, all right? Just one now. And that is that **God's love is a patient love**. I've titled the message, "*Dr. Love and His Patients*" – word play! You learn in this chapter about the patience of God.

See, Jonah is struggling with the *promiscuity* of God's love. Now we're not going to deal with that this week. But Jonah is struggling with the fact that God would be so promiscuous as to just forgive and bless and throw His love on people of all sorts, *regardless* of their past and regardless of their pedigree and regardless of what they've done.

He is struggling with that, and because he is struggling with the promiscuity of God's love, he misses the *patience* of God's love. Jonah's life *depends* on the patience of God's love. And yet Jonah has fallen back into the very same sin that God spent the whole rest of the book trying to deliver him from...and he admits it! He says, "Yep! That's really what I was doing to start with. I'm *mad* at you, God." And he falls right back into it.

And the only thing keeping Jonah from oblivion at this point is the patience of God. So the question I want us to tackle this morning – really in two parts – is simply this; Why is God’s patient love not more operative and powerful in our lives? And the follow up is *how* can God’s patient love be more powerful and operative in our lives? Hear that? *Why* is it not something that we’re not more powerfully aware of and *how* can it be more operative in our lives? Those two questions.

What do we learn about the patience of God? Simply this: The key teaching of the book of Jonah (at least in this chapter) is that fruitful Christians, visibly prominent Christians can fall back into old patterns of sin and self-deception so that only the patient love of God stands between us and oblivion. That’s bad news. And the good news is that God’s patient love is such that He will always bring us back. That’s the lesson we get about the patient love of God because Jonah is such a perfect example.

Jonah is a *perfect* example. You have to remember not only has he realized a tremendous spiritual accomplishment in Nineveh, but he also had a tremendous personal experience just a couple of verses ago. After the big fish, he was saying, “I’ve almost died because I denied my God and almost destroyed everything.

My racism, how I hated Nineveh, my foolishness, my self-righteousness, all of these things almost destroyed everything. What a narrow escape! I repent, O Lord. I’ll never do that again. I’ll never do that again.” And here he is back.

What does this teach us? For a start, many Christians share with many non-Christians a similar misunderstanding about the nature of what a Christian is. A lot of Christians believe that now that they are followers of Christ - now that they’re “born again” - they are on a higher plane and they really can’t fall far. And a lot of non-Christians also believe that Christians believe that. They say, “You born-again types, you believe you’re sure you’re going to heaven, then you ought to act much better than the average person.”

And so what an awful lot of people - both Christians and non-Christians - believe is that the essence of a Christian is someone who is a lot better than anybody else. Now listen to me. While it’s true that in time Christians may be better than others, it’s not true that *by definition* a Christian is a better person than others. Not at all! You have to understand what the Bible actually teaches is the difference between a Christian and someone who is not.

The moment you become a Christian, the moment you give yourself to Christ, the moment you pass over the line into faith, the moment you are converted – whatever descriptor we want to use - what is there about you that is different than somebody who has not done that? What is it? Let's just mention two things. One, Christians, at first, are no stronger than other people, except in one thing: They are strong enough to admit their weakness. They're strong enough to admit their weakness. What do I mean by that? They are strong enough to admit they are too wicked to actually come to God without a Savior. They are strong enough to admit that they are too incompetent to run their own lives and therefore must give their lives over to a master.

Here, let me make this statement and you tell me what you think: A Christian is somebody who says, "I am wicked. I am sinful. I am self-centered. I have lived for myself and my own glory. I am proud and rebellious, and in myself I'm incapable of real love and real godliness or holiness." What do you think of that statement? Do you think it's extreme? Do you believe that I've just gone too far? Do you believe that's bad for self-esteem?

Do you respond, "Well, I know I've got my faults, sure, but I'd never say that sort of thing about myself." You lack the strength to admit the truth about your weakness. You lack the very thing Christians have from God. You actually lack something that Christians *do* have over anybody else. They're strong enough to admit they're weak. Do you see that? That is not something you're capable of without God giving it to you. That's a work of the Holy Spirit. That's not a strength anybody has on their own. We don't have the strength to look at ourselves and admit the worst.

We don't have the strength to do it without shifting the blame to our family or shifting the blame to our past or shifting the blame to our situation. A Christian takes full responsibility and says, "Nope! I'm too bad to run my own life. I'm too incompetent; I need a King. I'm too wicked to be accepted by God; I need a Savior." Do you hear that? That's the first thing: Christians are not less sinful than non-Christians, but they have one strength, and that is they admit the level and degree and magnitude of their sin. If you think what I just said is too much, you lack the strength to say it.

Secondly, the other thing that makes a Christian different is when you admit your weakness and you finally turn to Christ and say, “Oh Lord, because I am nothing, you must be my everything. I trust in you as my King and I trust in you as my Savior.” The moment you receive pardon, the moment you say that, the Spirit of God is implanted in your heart. Christians have the Holy Spirit living inside them. And if you thought the first one was uncomfortable, you ain’t seen nothing yet. Because not only does the Christian have to continuously admit that “I’m weak”, but I’m also possessed by a spirit!

This is the definition of what the Scripture calls being born again. Now, it could not occur in anyone *before* Jesus made it possible by his death and resurrection. Before that – in the Old Testament for instance – the Holy Spirit would settle on a person for a specific time to accomplish a specific task and then leave. But a New Testament Christian has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at all times.

Can I show you the first time it happened? This is when Jesus’ disciples, the 12 – well, by this time the 11, Judas didn’t hang around – this is when Jesus’ closest followers become “born again Christians” in a proper sense. The Gospel of John tells us about the first time Jesus appeared to the apostles after his resurrection, **John 20:21-22**, “*Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with*

that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” That’s the moment.

And that’s what happens to *you* when you become a Christian. That’s what *makes* you a Christian. Jesus imports the Spirit to you. One of those disciples, Peter, refers to the Holy Spirit with a gardening metaphor, (**1 Peter 1:23**), “*For you have been **born again**, not of perishable **seed**, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*” The Holy Spirit is “an imperishable seed.” It’s like a little seed that goes into the ground and eventually up will come a tree. It comes into your heart like a seed, and as it matures, it will bear fruit, thus changing the heart.

But...now, listen, this is important. When a seed is planted that does not mean that everything has changed *yet*. Likewise, when the Holy Spirit enters your heart, You are *legally* new, you’re *virtually* new, but you’re not *actually* new. Let me go back to Peter’s metaphor to explain what I mean. The remainder of that passage says (**1 Peter 1:24-25**) “*For, ‘All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you.*” Ok, so Peter says your ass is grass! Oh lighten up!

Now, is anybody starting to pay attention to your yard yet? I know it's still "winter", but lawn season is just around the corner. And let's say your yard is overrun with crabgrass and you want to get rid of it. Well, you can spend all your time pulling the weeds up – and of course, they'll be back tomorrow. Now, a more effective organic solution is to plant some zoysia grass. Do you know what zoysia grass is?

Two things to know about zoysia grass – I like saying it, *zoysia* grass! – one is it's very invasive, you don't even have to seed the yard, a few plugs will crowd out every other species in your yard. And second thing, it's very slow growing, it may even take a few growing seasons before it takes over. But once it does, it's game over for every other species, and you will have a beautiful lawn.

Which means, the day you plant the zoysia grass plugs – just little plugs – the crabgrass doesn't go anywhere. The crabgrass, as a matter of fact, looks pretty much the same...but the crabgrass' days are numbered. And you can look down and whisper "You don't even know it yet, but you guys are finished!" In a sense, the crabgrass now lives under the death sentence. Death row! It's only a matter of time.

On the day in which the Spirit of God – the imperishable seed - is planted in your heart, it's like planting those plugs of zoysia grass. On that day, sin no longer can condemn you. The condemning power of sin is gone, because you are *forgiven*. Your sins can no longer create a barrier between you and God. On the day when you're finally strong enough to admit your weakness and to say, "Lord, would you be my Savior?" On that day, God takes away the barrier between Himself and you. You're adopted into the family. Your sins are forgiven and sin no longer has condemning power over you...but it still has actual power.

Do you think that those old patterns of anger, and of fear, and of dishonesty, and denial are all gone away? All those bad habit patterns? No. They're under a death sentence, but they're still there. The condemning power of sin is gone forever, but the actual power of sin, though under a death sentence, is still present. And therefore, it can erupt. In fact, it may be more aggressive than it was before. You know, there are a lot of animals that are not terribly dangerous *unless* they are mortally wounded. Sometimes the realization of impending doom can make them very nasty and considerably more hostile than before.

And on the day you plant those little plugs, on the day that the Holy Spirit comes into your life, you have mortally wounded your anger, your fear, your self-centeredness, your pride, all those things that have made your life miserable, that you haven't been able to overcome. And very often, instead of it immediately decreasing, sometimes it seems to erupt even worse. Why? It's mortally wounded! It's under a death sentence, but it is still there.

Do you think that prominent Christians, fruitful Christians, loving Christians can fall into some pretty bad, old sins and self-deception? Of course. Don't get me wrong; usually, when you first come to Christ the *joy* of having the condemning power of sin gone overwhelms you. It's great! The Bible begins to get *clear* to you. Prayer begins to be *real*. Your burdens seem lighter. The guilt begins to go away out of your life. You sense a new purpose in life.

You have a joy, because the condemning power of sin is gone, *but* the actual power of sin is still present, under a death sentence. And because of that, if you're not careful, it can blindside you. It can discourage you. Make you question if you really are saved. Don't do that. Cling to the love of God all the harder. The reason we do not know how *patient* God's love is, is because we do not know how *persistent* our sin is. Sin is subtle, my friends. So with that in mind, I want to ask you...if it could happen to Jonah, could it happen to you?

Jonah rationalized his sin. Jonah probably believed, "Hey, I'm a preacher. I'm a professional Christian, here! These sorts of things aren't going to happen to me. I'm not going to fall back." Nobody ever admits sin when it's bewitching you. When you decide to disobey God, you don't say, "Oh, I'm rebelling against my Sustainer and my Creator, and I'm descending to a subhuman, degraded mode of existence." You don't do that. Instead, what do you do? You say, "I'm being self-authenticating. I'm being modern. I'm following my heart. I'm freeing myself from oppression. I'm being practical. I mean how else can you function in my field?"

Jonah did the same thing. When Jonah originally fled, what do you think he was saying? Did he say, "I'm going to spit in my Maker's face?" No! What Jonah said is, "Hey, if Assyria is forgiven by God, Israel is doomed! So I'm going to flee! I'm not going to go and take the message to Assyria. And even though I may die in the process, I will be giving my life for my country!" You see, isn't it amazing? His race-based nationalism, his belief that he was a superior kind of person to the pagans and his country was a superior kind of country to Assyria, his self-righteousness and pride that would enable him to condemn the greatest city of the world to complete death. He was able to rationalize it as patriotism and self-denial.

What are you excusing in your own life right now? What are you rationalizing in your own life? Think about it! It's still there, under sentence of death, but it's *there*, and it will find a way to erupt. It'll still find a way to express itself and put forth its power. It's an old, old story. The oldest! Adam and Eve's two sons, Cain was angry and depressed because his brother Abel had been favored over him. In **Genesis 4:6-7**, God comes to Cain, and like a wonderful counselor, *"Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.""*

What God was saying to Cain is, "My dear boy, you think your problem is your brother, Abel. You think your problem is due to how other people are treating you, but don't you see? Actually, there's a sin in your life. Your pride, your self-centeredness is crouching at your door. It's there in the shadows. It wants to have you. Give it no quarter! Admit it for what it is! Don't blame your problems on everybody else around you! If you don't see sin as sin, if you're not willing to admit what it is, it will completely dominate you." And of course it did.

In the same way, I *beg* you – God is begging you - take a look at your life. Stop blaming your situation.

Stop rationalizing what's going on. Stop giving it psychological or sociological names. Call it the pride, call it the self-centeredness, call it the dishonesty, call it the lack of integrity, call it the impurity, call it what it is...sin! Don't say, "I'm not rebellious; I'm just sad." Don't say, "I'm not denying the goodness and wisdom of God; I'm just worried." Don't say, "I'm not being immoral; I'm just lonely!"

So the answer to the question of why we don't know the patient love of God is because we are not willing to admit to the great degree how powerful our selfishness and pride still exist in our lives. So what do we do about it? How do we get God's patient love to be more operative and powerful in our lives? What happens if you do find yourself beginning to slide back into old patterns of sin and self-deception? How can you avoid it and what happens if you start doing it? What can you do? Four things. Look what happens with Jonah.

Number one, Examine your heart. God comes to Jonah and what does He say to Jonah? Very interesting. **Jonah 4:4**, *"But the Lord replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"* Literally it translates, "Do you do well to be angry?" It's a question designed to get Jonah to do a self-examination. He says, "Jonah, look at your motives. Why are you angry? What's the root of it? What's the cause?" God really is a wonderful counselor. "What's underlying these emotions? Do you have a good motive?"

Now we're going to look at this in future weeks, but what God is saying is, "Look for the idols in your life." God is saying, "What are you really *living* for? What are you really *resting* in? What really are you after? Don't you see when you're angry, it's not so much because of what people have done to you, but because they're keeping you from reaching a goal that is more important to you than I am? The reason you're worried is not because of your situation but because circumstances out there are endangering a goal that is more important to you than I am." Look at yourself! Sliding back into old patterns of sin begins in the heart.

And watch out for what happens in that heart, because, listen, if somebody comes to me and says, "Food doesn't taste good. Breathing is hard. It hurts when I walk." What's the problem? Well, if it's just one of those things, maybe you've got a bad chef, or air pollution or bad shoes. But if it's *all* of them, there's a good chance the problem is your body is diseased. Right? And if you're finding Christianity to be a drag, if you find studying the Bible, praying to God, Christian duties and disciplines to be a drag or boring, the problem is not with the Christianity; the problem is that your heart is beginning to go bad. You're beginning to let those old weeds start to creep on back. Examine yourself first.

Secondly, Confess sin. Now, I have a theory about the book of Jonah. I've already said, I'm agnostic about whether or not the book is historical or if it's a parable. But if it really happened – and why not? – we have to ask a question. How do we even *know* about Jonah 4? I mean, why would you make the hero look this stupid...unless it really happened? Which means Jonah must have told somebody about it.

I think the same thing about Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus on the night he was betrayed. He had to tell that on himself. Which would mean Jonah eventually confessed. Because if the story really happened, the only way we could possibly know is if he was willing to *tell* somebody about it! Confession means unmask the sin, call it by its own name, and be accountable to somebody else. Tell somebody about it.

Think back, what was God trying to get from Cain? He was saying, "Name the beast. Sin is crouching at the door." What Cain was saying was, "God, I'll tell you what the problem is. It's my uppity, goody-two-shoes brother Abel, who everybody prefers over me, and the reason I'm depressed is because of the unfairness of it!" But actually, at the door was crouching envy and self-pity.

And what Cain should've said is, "Oh Lord, you're right! My brother is uppity, and he's a very hard person to endure, but the real reason I'm miserable, the reason I'm in the state I'm in is because of *my* infernal need to be the center of attention. It's because of my jealousy. It's because You're not enough for me, and Oh Lord, I'm going to realize that whatever I really need You'll give to me. I *repent* of that jealousy. I call it by its name."

And if he had named the beast, it could not have devoured him, but he refused to name it. Maybe he psychologized it. Maybe he rationalized it. But he didn't *own* it. He didn't confess it. And as a result the beast in the shadows pounced, because in the very next verse we read, (**Genesis 4:8**), "*Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel **and killed him.**"* Abel died, but Cain was devoured.

I think Jonah unmasked the sin, called it by name publicly, so millions of people throughout all of the rest of the history of the world would know what a fool he was. Now, I'm not asking anything like that of you this morning. Talk to *one* other person. But unmask your sin. **James 5:16** says, "*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*" Confess your sin to God and to somebody else and be accountable for it.

Thirdly, Abide in Love. Make sure you recognize that God's patient love is the thing that will keep you out of despair. When you first become a Christian, you say, "I know I'm saved, simply because of God's love." But you don't really believe it. Because it takes a number of years, when you see how often you've broken His promises, how often you've fallen down and you begin to hear a voice in your heart that goes like this, "And you call yourself a Christian! Why should God ever talk to you again? Why should He listen to you again? Why should He respond to your prayers? Why should He ever accept you?"

And do you know the reason why those thoughts haunt you? They haunt you because you don't really believe that you're a sinner saved by grace. You really kind of thought, "Hey, by being a good person God will accept me." And then, when you see you're not so good, when you see the persistence of your stubbornness, the persistence of your actual sin, you begin to wonder why God will accept you. In that moment, it's very important that you drill down deep to the bedrock of God's patient love.

Because you haven't yet grasped *experientially* that which you knew *intellectually* and that is that God's love is unmerited, undeserved and free, and therefore unending and *infinitely* persistent. It's patient love. And when you realize that, you begin to develop a comfort, and you develop a certainty, and you develop a foundation. You look at God's patient love and you say, "That's my hope." And you have to do it over and over again. Live it in. Abide in it.

Fourth and lastly, Stand firm. The grace in your life, the strength in your life, is like a muscle. When Paul talks about spiritual growth, one of the metaphors he uses is that of armor. He says in **Ephesians 6:13**, “*Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.*” Armor is a picture of battle, which is a picture of discipline. You *train* for battle.

You have to train your muscles. What happens if you don’t consistently use a muscle? First it stiffens, and then it atrophies. Disciplines have to be regular and consistent. If you’re not praying, if you’re not repenting, if you’re not spending time with other Christians, if you’re not seeking to live an upright life, the grace in your life *atrophies*. Like a candle, it flickers, and it goes down and down and down.

Am I talking about losing your salvation? No, but you won’t be of any use for the salvation of the world – a world that God cares about very much. Seek God! Draw near to Him! He will come. Examine your heart. Confess the sin that the Spirit reveals to you - be accountable to somebody. Don’t fall into despair at what you discover, but abide – remain in – God’s patient love as your everything – your very reason for being. And finally, after you’ve done everything to stand, *stand!* Use those spiritual muscles. Stay in those spiritual disciplines – not to be right with God – but to *do right for God*.

And maybe there is somebody here right now who says, “Now, wait. You’re telling me it’s possible to backslide out of a great life of reality with God, the strength to admit my weaknesses, the knowledge that I’m completely welcome at His table as His child?” And you’re out there saying, “You know, I’ve never lost a faith like that, because I’ve never *had* it. I never slid out of faith like that, because I never really possessed it.”

Therefore, today, the biggest response you can make to God’s love is to pray a prayer of salvation. As Paul says, if you confess Jesus is Lord – “Jesus I want you to be the leader of every area of my life. I’m done with being my own lord.” And believe in your heart God raised him from the dead – “Jesus I believe that at a moment in history, you really lived in a physical body, you died a real death on the cross, and on the third day, you were brought back to fully resurrected life, and all for my benefit.” Paul says, you do that and “you will be saved”.

Now, for the rest of us, we’re going to close with a different prayer. We’re going to be a little high church liturgical today. Historically, the church has prayed a prayer of confession together. And I think it would be appropriate to end on that note today. Now, if you don’t think you have anything of which to confess – Okie dokie. But let me read something for you before you decide. Here, according to Jesus, are what all the commands of scripture – the bedrock of obedience for the professing Christian - boil down to.

Matthew 22:37-40, “*Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. ”*” I suppose I could additionally read the Ten Commandments or something, but Jesus says that covers them all.

So, how about now? Anybody all good? Anybody loving God with *all* your heart and soul and mind? Anybody loving your neighbor *as much as* you love yourself? If not, then I invite you to stand and pray aloud with me as a congregation the following prayer...

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.*

*We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.*

*For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Now receive comfort in your heart with these words...

Our God fulfills His promises and is true to His word.
We have confessed our sins.
God has forgiven us,
because Christ died for us. Amen.