God’s Concern and Jonah’s Concern

(Jonah’s anger at the Lord’s compassion)

Jonah 4:1-11

Key Verse:4:11 “ 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?”

 One philosopher described the contradiction and duplicity of the human condition as a man who attempts to eat honey from a honeycomb on the cliff. The man was chased by a wild beast and jumped down off a cliff to save his life. Fortunately, he was caught on a tree under the cliff and hung there. He was desperate for his life, and his life was in great danger. But when he saw a honeycomb on the tree, he felt hungry. He stretched out his finger to taste the honey in the middle of this desperate situation between life and death. This story makes me think about contradiction and absurdity of human beings. People struggle hard to survive in this tough world. Some are in a desperate situation for their security and safety. In the midst of this desperate situation they make every effort to enjoy momentary happiness and comfort. Last Friday we heard a shocking news story from Wash U. A Wash U student was found dead on the construction site Friday morning. We don’t know who the student was and why he died. But it was a very sad story. The same night I drove to South 40, the dormitories of Wash U., and saw many students going to party, whether they heard the tragic news of the student or not. I felt the absurdness of human beings through these two incidents.

 The more I study about Jonah, the more I am interested in Jonah’s contradictory character. I also cannot but praise God, who took care of such a difficult person as Jonah to the end. Last week we studied how Jonah repented in the belly of the huge fish and carried out God’s mission to the city of Nineveh. I praised his prayer in his distress and his confession in the belly of the fish. But in today’s message we see a completely different picture of Jonah from last week. I was confused by his contradictory words and behavior. How can we accept these two pictures of Jonah? What can we learn from God who took care of Jonah? What are God’s concerns and Jonah’s concerns?

Look at verse 1. “***But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.***” Here the word “this” means the Ninevites’ repentance and God’s relenting. 3:10 says, “*When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened*.” After hearing the message of judgment from Jonah, the people in the city of Nineveh, from top to bottom, repented and asked for God’s mercy. After this, Jonah should have been very glad and thankful to God for their repentance and God’s mercy on them. Their repentance was the fruit of Jonah’s preaching. To our surprise Jonah became very angry with this. He thought that this seemed very wrong. He meant that he had expected a different result. He did not want the Ninevites to repent. He wanted to see them punished by God and destroyed from top to bottom. What a contradictory man Jonah was!

Why did he become angry? He wanted only his people to be saved, not the gentiles. He was a very nationalistic and Judaic prophet. He had *selfish love* for his people. Is selfish love a love, too? What do you think about ‘*selfish love*’? The words ‘selfishness’ and ‘love’ are contradictory, but they exist. When we care only for ourselves, our family, our ministry, and our country, we have selfish love. When we are not happy with other’s success and prosperity, we have selfish love. When we are glad to see other’s misfortune and tragedy, we have selfish love. Jonah was angry when his enemies the Ninevites were saved by God’s mercy. He thought that the Ninevites should have been punished by God because of their sins. He wanted God to love his people only.

Let’s read verse 2. “***He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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***.” Jonah prayed to God in his anger. People usually don’t pray to God when they become angry. They become slaves to their emotions. But Jonah prayed to God in his distress and in his anger. What an interesting person! But his prayer was not a humble request or praise, but a complaint. He complained to God about why he didn’t obey God from the beginning. He didn’t obey God because God is a gracious and compassionate God. Jonah knew that God surely would forgive the Ninevites when they repented because God is gracious and compassionate. So, he ran away from God when God called him to go to Nineveh with the message of judgment.

In his complaining prayer, Jonah revealed who the Lord God is. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. But Jonah was merciless and exclusive, quick to anger and selfish in love. He also complained to God with an extreme request. It was a threat rather than a request. Look at verse 3. “***Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.***” His complaint reached even to the point of death. He meant that it would be better for him to die than to see the Ninevites be saved. How did God answer him? Look at verse 4. “***But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry***?” The Lord’s answer reminds us of the father’s answer to his first son, who complained about his father’s mercy on his prodigal brother who came back home after squandering his life in wild living. (Lk 15: ) In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the second son rebelled against his father and went to a distant country with his share of the estate. In the foreign land, the son wasted all the money and became extremely poor and hungry. When he hit bottom, he remembered his father’s house and returned home, expecting his father’s mercy. The son didn’t expect his father’s favor as a son, but his father welcomed him and restored all things to his returning son. The father prepared a banquet and invited his neighbors to celebrate with him for his returning son. But his first son was not happy with this. To him this seemed very wrong and he became angry. He did not accept his father’s grace and compassion for his prodigal brother. The first son expected that his brother would be punished by his father rather than be welcomed because of his rebellious and wasteful life. So the first son refused to join the welcoming party.

Here we learn human being’s contradictions and absurdity from Jonah and the first son’s anger. They should have been glad to see sinners’ repentance and God’s favor on the returning sinners. Instead of being angry, they should be happy. But they became angry at the Lord’s compassion. We must not do that. We must be happy with sinners’ repentance and God’s compassion. We must be thankful for God’s favor on our enemies. We must share God’s broken heart for the lost world.

How did Jonah react to God’s favor on the Ninevites? Jonah ignored God’s gentle rebuke. He went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Jonah wanted to see fireworks and a baptism of brimstone over the city of Nineveh. The day was hot and the sun was scorching. But the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort. Jonah was very happy about the plant. He was very angry with the salvation of tens of thousands of Ninevites, but he was very happy with the shade provided by a leafy plant. This is sinful men’s absurdness.

Look at verses 7-8. “***But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live***.” Jonah’s happiness didn’t last long. A worm chewed the plant and the plant withered. The leafy plant was gone. Then, scorching heat and blazing sunlight made Jonah dehydrated and made him almost faint. Jonah became angry again with this discomfort. He protested to God again with a suicidal threat. “*It would be better for me to die than to live*.”

Look at verse 9. “***But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.***” In this chapter, God’s answer to Jonah’s complaint was the gentle rebuke, “Is it right for you to be angry?” God asked him twice with the same questions. Jonah replied God three times with the same answer, “It is better for me to die than to live.” (3,8,9) How would you deal with an ungrateful and rebellious person like Jonah? Some might be tempted to say, “Jonah, enough is enough. My patience has run out! Do whatever you want to do, whether you live or die. Just shut up!” But God didn’t say this. Our God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. God loved Jonah despite his rebellion and selfishness. God wanted to teach him what God’s heart really is. God wanted Jonah to share God’s broken heart for the lost world.

God taught Jonah in verses 10-11. “***But the Lord said, “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***?” In these verses we learn about Jonah’s concern and God’s concern. What was Jonah’s concern? Jonah’s concern was the leafy plant which gave him shade. His concern was about his comfort and ease from the scorching heat. His concern was small and temporal physical happiness.

What was God’s concern? God’s concern was salvation for more than one hundred and twenty thousand people plus the many animals in the city of Nineveh. God’s concern was their repentance and salvation from his divine judgment. His concern is more than the salvation of one city. God’s concern is world salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you remember Jesus’ rebuke to Peter, who had rebuked Jesus when he spoke about his suffering, death, and resurrection? Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns*.” (Mt 16:23) Human concerns are success and blessings on this earth. Human concerns are wealth, good health, a stable job, a happy marriage, one’s children’s success, good relationships, a good retirement plan, and so on. Peter’s concern was Israel’s restoration and Jesus’ earthly messianic kingdom. His concern was to sit on the right side of Jesus and serve with him as a king. His concern was his future security and his loyalty to Jesus and his kingdom.

What are your concerns? What concerns you most today? People seem to have a great vision and plans, but many of them are more concerned with their leafy plant which give them temporal ease and comfort and small material benefit. Some are concerned with their children’s education. Others are concerned about their security. Still others are concerned with their pride and with recognition. When their concerns are not satisfied, they become nervous and angry. Because of a leafy size of material benefit, a leafy size of recognition, and a leafy size of pride, they fight each other and hate each another. What a contradictory picture of human beings who inherit God’s greatness.

What is God’s concern? God’s concern is for the whole world. His broken heart for the lost world was revealed in his answer in verse 11. His concern is not selfish or nationalistic. His concern is sacrificial and redemptive. Jesus was crucified on the cross by his enemies. What did Jesus do on the cross? He prayed for them. He prayed for those who nailed him to the cross, saying, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*.” (Lk 23:34) Jesus was concerned about others while he was dying on the cross. He didn’t care for himself, but for those who were suffering from the power of sin and death. God’s concern is world salvation. This is why God called each of us to join world mission. This is why God called us to share his broken heart for the lost world.

The death of one Wash U. student is not a small matter to me. If he met me or our missionaries and heard the gospel message one time, his destiny might have been changed. He might have escaped from his death. When I saw many students in South 40 wandering here and there on Friday night, my heart was broken. They were like sheep without a shepherd. Lord, help us to share your broken heart for lost souls and the lost world. Let us have the concerns of God, not merely the concerns of men. As Jesus said, “*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field*.” (Lk 10:2) Amen.