

<sup>5</sup> Jonah 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. <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. <sup>7</sup> But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> 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."

<sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

<sup>10</sup> But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. <sup>11</sup> But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

In the name of the God of all grace, dear friends in Christ,

We're used to having things related to our heart checked. Standard procedure for an office visit or checkup with your doctor means that they'll strap the cuff on your arm, it will tighten and then begin to slowly loosen and just a moment later, the nurse can tell you your blood pressure. That test tells you what's going on in the arteries when the heart beats and when it rests. In addition to damaging the arteries and doing other bad things, high blood pressure can damage the heart. It's good that this is a thing that is regularly checked. There are other tests and scans and screenings for the heart and heart-related issues—as some of us know all-too-well. The heart is kind of important (!), so all these tests are good things!

Today you see that our sermon theme is simply...HEART-CHECK. But it's obviously not a physical check that we're concerned with today, it's a spiritual one. We're considering God's prophet Jonah this morning and the account of his thinking and behavior is shocking and surprising and appalling, but sadly, we may also find that we can identify with the pouting prophet. There's a little Jonah inside of each of us and it is possible that the soul-threatening, sinful responses he had can also be found in us and they need to be addressed, just as his needed to be. You may find it interesting to see how God does that too. It reveals something wonderful about our Savior-God.

So, let's review what we know of Jonah and what led this prophet of God to require a HEART-CHECK. We'll also see how God administered the test and find out what this has to do with us.

---

The real-life story of Jonah is one that is somewhat familiar to many people. Most of us have at least heard that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. But that might be all we know. Technically, we don't know that it was a whale. God says it was a "big fish." We may remember that God provided a big fish to swallow Jonah because God told him to go and preach against the sins of the people living in Nineveh and Jonah didn't want to do it. God said "*Go this way*" and Jonah instead hopped in a boat and headed *that way*! This is why Jonah has been nicknamed "The Reluctant Prophet." It seems he had a little heart problem from the very beginning! So the short version of the story is, Jonah ran the opposite direction because he didn't want to do what God wanted him to do. Nineveh was the capital city of the world superpower Assyria. The truth is, I probably would have been a little freaked out about going to preach in Nineveh too. Those people were cruel! They would cut off the heads of their enemies and hang them around the necks of the people they kept alive as captives. They would make sons crush the bones of their fathers. There was no end to their cruelty. If it was only fear that caused Jonah to run, we might understand that to some extent, but it was more than that. There was an even bigger heart problem.

You'll have to read the details on your own, but Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish that God provided. He was miraculously kept alive inside the fish for three days where he had time to think, to pray, to repent for rejecting God's call to serve. At the Lord's command, the fish then vomits him up onto the shore and Jonah then agrees to go to Nineveh. The fish experience was a good test of his heart!

So Jonah went and he preached that God was going to destroy the people of the city. Clearly his preaching of the law warned them to repent. And if you are among those who are wowed by the miracle of living inside a fish for a few days, consider this miracle—an entire heathen nation repented of their sin before the LORD! You can read for yourself how they showed their repentance, but they did repent. And the Lord did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

Good story. Good result. Jonah must have been happy and proud to have been a part of such a wonderful, miraculous spiritual turnaround. Sadly, that's not true. What happened then is so stunning and reveals such a horrible heart problem, I've got to read to you:

**But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 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. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"**  
**(Jonah 4:1–4 )**

What in the world was wrong with him?! This was a prophet in need of a HEART-CHECK because he obviously had a serious spiritual problem! It's clear that he did not want those people to be spared or saved. But what's even worse, he didn't like the way God handled his business! He just *knew* God would be full of grace and mercy, that he might forgive *those people*. In his anger, he even admitted that this is why he at first got in a boat and headed in the opposite direction. If he didn't go, they couldn't be saved. What a cold, calculating heart! He admits this to God and then—like a drama queen throwing herself on the bed in hopeless despair—Jonah says, "*I just want to die!*" Wow.

We would never behave like that, right? We would never think that someone else shouldn't be forgiven for what they did. We would never think that someone...or *those people* (whoever that might be) are a waste of time to talk to about God. We would never be angry or suspicious or resentful over someone who seemingly came to faith on their deathbed, for instance. Who are we kidding? We know we struggle with things like that. We like to impose our standards of fairness on God. We'll consider that more next week, but you know we have heart problems like that.

It's helpful to see how the LORD deals with his prophet. Like a nurse doing an intake or a doctor asking probing questions of an afflicted patient, the Savior God who is abounding in love asks Jonah some questions and he runs some tests on his heart.

The LORD asked Jonah, **"Have you any right to be angry?"** The prophet is left to think about his reaction to God's undeserved love, to search his heart and mind. And that's where our text picks up: Jonah then went outside the city, set up a shelter, and waited to see if God was really going to spare *those people*. The LORD's question didn't immediately change his heart.

So the LORD ran some tests. He provided a vine, which miraculously grew up quickly and provided welcome shade from the intense Middle-eastern sun. For the first time, we see a happy prophet! That shade-plant brought him great happiness. The test continued. In the morning, God provided a worm to chew the vine so that it would die. God was taking away the thing that brought Jonah joy. He was doing this to check his heart. God again provided something for Jonah—a sirocco, a scorching hot wind, and a blazing sun. We know something about scorching sun and heatstroke around here so we can easily picture the wilted prophet. And we're not surprised by now at his reaction to this—he again wants to die.

But God again tests his heart, **“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”** Jonah's response? **“I do...I am angry enough to die.”**

Oh boy. The almighty God who had the *power* to unleash fire from heaven and the *right* to subject him to the scorching heat of hell for eternity for his sinful reaction to God's forgiveness and love did something very different. He continued to work on Jonah's heart. He points out how ridiculous Jonah was being and then asks another probing question to put things into perspective: **“You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left (possibly a reference to the number of children there), and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”**

God's whiny prophet showed such great concern over something he had no control over and had nothing to do with. That was unreasonable. What was not unreasonable was that God should be concerned about a great city of people and their standing before the Lord. Jonah was out of line. His heart was not in the right place. Had he been thinking like the God of grace and mercy thinks, he would have been overjoyed at the success of God's Word that he preached to the people and their repentance before the LORD! Instead he found joy in a plant and anger over God's mercy shown to sinful people. Huge heart problem.

Not much has changed in 2,800 years. God's people still have heart problems. We still need to have our hearts checked by God. We still need to have our hearts healed. And God still shows amazing grace to undeserving sinners.

It's seems too obvious and simple for me to say to you, *“Don't think and act like Jonah”* but really, maybe it's best to say it just like that. You and I are as sick with sin as Jonah was. We don't always want to share God's message of repentance with people who need to hear it and sometimes we don't want to do that because there's an outside shot that they're actually going to repent! And sometimes we don't want them to because that means we'll have to forgive them and we don't want to do that. We think we know best and that it's only fair that some people suffer for what they've done. We have been guilty of not wanting to share God's Word with *those people*—people we somehow deem unworthy of God's love or unlikely to listen to his Word. God tells us the story of his prophet Jonah so that our hearts can be tested, so that we have the warning, *“Don't think and act like Jonah.”*

But an even bigger reason this bit of Assyrian history, this early missionary account, is shared with us is so that we can see what a big heart our God has. Jonah was partially right, you know. The people of Nineveh didn't deserve a prophet. They didn't deserve a message of warning from God. They didn't deserve to have God spare them, even if they did say they were sorry and meant it. The holy God and divine Judge doesn't owe that to anyone. But that also means that he didn't owe it to Jonah. Sinful, arrogant, rebellious, whiny, pouty, moody prophet that he was, he did not deserve the gentle teaching and patience which the LORD showed him in order to fix his heart.

It's a wonderful thing we learn about God as we read the book of Jonah. We have a God of amazing grace. We have been the beneficiaries of his love. He has not treated us as our sins deserve. A heart that is in tune with God's heart remembers that and wants that for others—no matter who they are or what they've done. Here's your HEART-CHECK: do you want murderers and those who have tortured people and terrorists to repent and be saved? Rapists? Molesters? If your idea is that there can be no forgiveness for ISIS members or those who deservedly sit on death row, your emotions have gotten in the way of your faith. You're thinking like Jonah who sat on a hill angry and pouting at God's desire that sinners would turn from their ways and live eternally, furious that God is so loving.

And if you're thinking like that, I pray that the LORD is as gentle with you as he was with Jonah when he tried to get his heart right—because those sins are just as damning before a holy God as any of the horrible things you witness in others. That is a fact. You and I and the world may rank sins, but every sin is a rebellion against a holy God and it ruins the possibility of eternal life with him.

The wonderful, inexplicable love of God for sinners moved him to send his Son, Jesus Christ, to live and die for sinners like Jonah and you and me and bloodthirsty terrorists like we see on the news and like God's prophet met face-to-face in the Assyrian capital. Don't be like Jonah and think that your sins are not as serious or that some people just shouldn't have God's undeserved love available to them. To think like that is to not understand your Savior and his willingness to die for even you.

I admit that having to really think about this can be pretty tough on us; it can be a real struggle for us like it was for a prophet of God. A serious spiritual HEART-CHECK every once in a while is a very good thing for us though. It can even make the difference between life and death for us—eternal life and eternal death.

We think that Jonah is the author of this book, telling his own story. The words of our text are the words with which the story ends. Jonah doesn't defend himself or explain anymore, but it seems that he finally understood as he simply leaves us with God's words of grace. It seems that perhaps Jonah's heart became in tune with his Savior's.

We pray that God would continue to work on *our* hearts, making them more and more like his—hearts that want all people to be saved and hearts that are willing to share God's grace as he calls us to do. Amen.

**Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.**