

JONAH, A VINE AND A WORM - JONAH 4:1-11

Learning from Life's Problems #3

James Forrestal was not a household name like Eisenhower or MacArthur or Doolittle during W.W.2, but those who were in the inner circle of the war effort knew his importance to achieving final victory. Forrestal left an influential position as President of one of the major Wall Street Firms to serve as Secretary of the Navy during the war. It was under his capable direction and leadership that we were able to build some 65,000 ships and 110,000 naval aircraft for use in the war after our fleet was almost totally destroyed in the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor. His organizational skills provided the fire power needed to subdue the enemy aggression and bring peace to the world once again. We all owe him a great debt of gratitude.

It surprised no one that Forrestal was appointed as our country's first Secretary of Defense following the war. Those in the know couldn't think of a more capable person for the job. But while he had been so successful in the financial jungle of Wall Street and had flourished as Secretary of the Navy in wartime, he soon became frustrated with the spotlight and political differences that he considered to be petty in peacetime. Here he was a man who had organized the building of an entire Navy within a couple of years, and now he was being subjected to the petty criticisms of journalists and political opponents after he had won peace for them. These whiny criticisms that are just commonplace in political sniping just made him angry – and a smoldering fire of bitterness began to burn within him. When he was asked what his favorite hobby was once by a reporter, he curtly replied, *obscurity*. It was obvious that a fire of anger was raging within this man who had done so much for our country. Forrestal left public life in March of 1949 a dejected and depressed man. It was just 2 months later that he tied one end of a rope around his neck and another around a radiator and jumped out of his 16th story apartment building window.

What would cause a man who was so intelligent and capable that he could make millions on Wall Street and rebuild a Navy that had been shattered by the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor to commit suicide? Part of a poem was found written on a piece of paper on his kitchen table. It was from Sophocles' *Chorus from Ajax*. *Better to die, and sleep the never waking sleep, than linger on, and dare to live, when the soul's life is gone.*

How does a person lose his soul's life? How does a person reach the place where death is preferable to life? How does a person become so mired in the black pit of despair that he can't see any light at all at the end of the tunnel? Well, in the case of James Forrestal, it all began with anger – anger that was left unresolved in his life. That anger burned and burned until it turned into bitterness of spirit. And that seed

of anger that grew into a plant of bitterness bore the fruit of depression that eventually took his will to live. Depression is certainly one of the greatest enemies a person can face - for it has the potential of nullifying all other capabilities that a person has. It could be argued that there were few people living in our country who had more abilities and potential than James Forrestal, the man who was able to orchestrate a war machine that could halt the advance of the Third Reich. But all of that potential and all of those abilities were nullified by his unrestrained anger that led to a root of bitterness that resulted in the fruit of depression.

We have begun a series looking at various life problems that we all share in common. We have already dealt with the subjects of guilt and stress. Now this morning, we come to this matter of a specific type of depression that we can all face if we don't deal with anger and bitterness properly in our lives. If we don't learn how to constructively deal with anger and bitterness these issues, we are going to have a constant battle with depression as well.

Now I don't claim to be an expert on all types of depression for this is a very complex subject. There are many different types of depression.

*there are downtimes which naturally come after exciting, climatic events in our lives. Birthdays, Christmas, vacations, graduations, promotions are often followed by times of depression. The prophet Elijah is a Biblical example of someone who suffered severe, even suicidal depression after the great victory on Mt.Carmel against the prophets of Baal.

*there are physical illnesses which lead to depression. Tumors, the flu, chemical imbalances, a broken leg, and any other physical illness can lead us into a state of depression. Job is an example of a person in the Bible who suffered severe, even suicidal, depression as a result of a severe illness that he had.

*There are genetic tendencies that some of us have towards depression because of chemical imbalances within our systems. Happily, we have many beneficial medications today that can balance the bipolar and other disorders that lead to such immobilizing depressions.

*There are times of depression that we must endure emotionally after we suffer a great loss in our lives. When we lose a child or a spouse or a career or even our favorite pet, we will usually suffer some depression. And the greater the loss, the greater the depths of depression. We plan to look at the life problem of grief that we will all share at some point in our lives next week, the Lord willing. So it is not our goal this morning to deal with the subject of depression in its entirety, for I am not an expert in the area, nor would even an expert have time to thoroughly answer all our questions in a half an hour.

But I have been amazed at how much the Bible addresses this common human malady. I noted over 100 references in the Bible to this problem in my study this past week. Phrases in the Bible such as *my soul is*

downcast, I am so discouraged, he became sorrowful even unto death, I am filled with despair, I feel so dejected and many others revealing hearts that are battling depression in the Bible.

In Jonah chapter 4 we find a person who is battling self inflicted depression from his own anger and bitterness, and we would like to look at his example this morning.

Jonah was a very capable person. He was a prophet of God. He had a very successful ministry in Israel according to 2 Kings 14:25. He had a strong personality as evidenced by this short book that he wrote. And most of us know the story of how God had to work with Jonah to get him to go to Nineveh and preach a message of repentance to them. God used some drastic measures to get Jonah to do what he had planned for him. God blew up a storm and prepared a great fish to house Jonah for 3 days and nights. And Jonah finally was brought to the place where he was willing to go to Nineveh. And when Jonah finally did go, he had unprecedented success. I don't think that there is a more successful evangelistic campaign in the whole Bible than the one Jonah experienced in Nineveh. There can be no question that Jonah was a capable, successful person.

But when we find Jonah in chapter 4, he is a depressed man even to the place where he has become suicidal. Notice Jonah's state of mind in some of these verses that we have just read.

¹ *But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry*

³ *Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

⁴ *But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"*

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

Here is a picture of a capable, gifted man who has allowed anger and bitterness to so eat him up inside that he has lost his will to live, that he prefers to die rather than go on living.

1. Now let's begin by examining the cause of Jonah's depression - and it is clear from our text that Jonah's depression was caused by anger. This chapter begins with the words *Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry*. God recognized the cause of Jonah's depression being anger for He asks him twice, *Jonah, do you have any right to be angry?*

Now again, we don't want to generalize Jonah's experience universally because there are other causes for depression. There are some physical causes as we mentioned earlier. But psychologists agree that unresolved anger results in depression in our lives. In fact, many psychological textbooks define depression as internalized anger. There can be no question that anger when it is not dealt with properly in our lives inevitably leads to depression. And that is exactly what happened in Jonah's case.

The Hebrew word that is translated *anger* here comes from the root meaning *to burn or set on fire*.

And this is a very apt way to describe this emotion. For just as a match that is set to paper or dry twigs catches them on fire and quickly spreads throughout the whole, so anger that is harbored in our hearts quickly spreads throughout our bodies and minds. And just as a fire that is out of control does tremendous damage to a building, so anger that gets out of control does tremendous damage to people. Anger that explodes from a person is like a terrorist bomb damaging the emotional wellbeing of the individual who is angry and everyone else it touches. Anger that is bottled up inside is like a raging fire that just consumes a person's emotional energies leaving depression in its wake. But just like a fire that is under careful control can be a great friend bringing warmth and light and heat, so anger that is under the control of the Holy Spirit can bring about great good in our lives and the lives of others. The Apostle Paul did not command us to stifle anger, he rather told us to *be angry without sinning, don't let the sun go down on your wrath*. There is a good anger, there is a righteous anger, but it was never God's intent for us to harbor anger in our lives allowing it to fester and grow into a bitter spirit.

Jonah was angry here. This was not a righteous anger, but it was rather an anger that came from his prejudice. Jonah didn't like the Assyrians. These people were enemies of the Israelites. Jonah had a prejudice against them. That is why Jonah had not followed God's directive and gone to warn them of their sin in the beginning. But God had used a great fish swallowing Jonah whole to change Jonah's mind. But Jonah had remained like that little boy who was disciplined in the corner. After his mother forced him to sit on a chair in the corner of the room, he was heard to remark *I might be sitting on the outside, but I'm still standing up on the inside*. Jonah had gone to Nineveh and proclaimed a message of God's judgment without repentance, but he still remained very prejudiced against these people on the inside. So when God didn't destroy them, Jonah became angry. And that anger led to a spirit of bitterness that produced the fruit of depression in his life.

2. Now whenever we have anger, it must be dealt with constructively or it will inevitably lead to depression. Communicating our feelings, physical exercise, writing out what is bothering us, doing some good hard work, and many other activities have proven themselves to be effective in dealing with anger in our lives. But when our anger isn't justified there is an added complication. There is anger that we feel that is justified at times. It is important that we resist the temptation to deny these feelings and that we deal with this anger constructively in our lives. But there are also times when we become angry without justification. We don't have a legitimate reason to be angry. This was the case in Jonah's life. So God asks Jonah twice whether he has any right to be angry. Jonah thought he did; but God knew that he didn't. So God had to teach Jonah a lesson, and he chose to do this through a vine and a worm. Now it is important for us to look

at this visual lesson in some depth for there is more truth taught here than first meets the eye.

After Jonah preached his message of God's impending judgment, he went out and sat on a hill overlooking the city to hope for a mass divine slaughter. It is important to remember that Jonah's message was not really a message of hope but it was rather a message of judgment and doom. There are only 8 words recorded of Jonah's preaching in the book that bears his name. *40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned.* This was not a message of hope. It was a prediction of doom. But the Bible records that the citizens of Nineveh from the king right down to all of the citizens repented from their sin. A fast was declared and they cried out to God for mercy. Some have hypothesized as to how this remarkable turn about occurred. We must remember that Nineveh is derived from the Assyrian root *ninus*, the word for fish. One of Nineveh's most prominent deities, Semiramis the Queen of Heaven, was worshipped in the form of a dove. So here comes Jonah (whose name in Hebrew means dove) being miraculously thrown out of the belly of a great fish. Who can even imagine what Jonah looked like having spent 3 days and nights in the fish's stomach. It would have been almost natural for the citizens of Nineveh to assume that this prophet was either an incarnation of one of their major deities or at least speaking on the deities' behalf. It's no wonder that they took Jonah's message very seriously and immediately responded to it.

It's obvious that the brief message that Jonah declared implied that God's judgment would not fall on Nineveh if the people repented of their evil ways. When the citizens of Nineveh from the King on down to the peasants did turn from their sinful ways, Jonah was displeased and angry that God had spared them. So he sat there sulking and pouting under the hot, Middle Eastern sun. Jonah tried to make a shelter to shield himself from the sun, but he was still very uncomfortable. It was at this point that God caused a plant to grow so that Jonah would have shade. Anyone who has been to the Middle East and has seen the often desolate conditions of the semi-desert regions and felt the heat of the summer sun can appreciate how much this shade must have meant to Jonah. We can't be dogmatic about the specific plant God caused to grow, but the Hebrew word would probably indicate a wild, broad leafy, vine like plant. These were often poisonous in nature. In any case, Jonah quickly adopted the plant as his own and enjoyed its gift of shade.

But God was not done with his lesson yet, was he? God brought along a worm that chewed through the vine so that it died and withered. This was not just any worm. It was a *to-law* worm. This Hebrew word is not only translated *worm* in the Bible, but it is also the word that is used to describe the color crimson. The reason for this is the simple fact that this specific worm was used to make the crimson dye that was so valuable in these days. These *to-law* worms would be taken and literally crushed. The mixture of their blood and parts was then used to make this valuable dye. It was this dye that the Bible says was used to

color the curtains that hung in the tabernacle and temple, and that was also used in the clothing of the High Priest himself. That this worm was used to picture the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ cannot be questioned, for David wrote in the most prophetic of Psalms where he speaks of Christ being forsaken by God the Father, his hands and feet being pierced and his bones being pulled out of joint, *I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: he trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Ps. 22:6-8.* The word that David used for worm in this passage was *to-law*.

Now there is an obvious lesson that God was teaching Jonah through this vine and its destruction. Jonah had quickly taken ownership of that which was really not his in adopting this vine for his own use. Jonah had done nothing to cause the growth of this vine - God had produced the vine. Yet Jonah had become angry when the vine was destroyed by the worm. If God made the vine to grow, God also had the right to destroy the vine. Jonah really didn't have a right to be angry about it. And the application to the situation at Nineveh is obvious, isn't it? The citizens of Nineveh were not Jonah's property. God had created them - every one of them. If God wanted to be merciful to them sparing them from disaster, Jonah had no right to be angry about it. Jonah hadn't created these Ninevites in the first place, so he had no right to determine their destiny - just as he hadn't created the vine and had no right to be angry about its withering and dying.

But there is another lesson that is less obvious but just as important to note in discussing this matter of dealing with our anger. Very often in life, we hide under the shelter of our anger because that is what we are told to do by the world. The world's experts tell us to vent our angry in many, indiscriminate ways. And many listen because this does bring a temporary relief. But many others are wounded and destroyed in the process. But the world's experts do not have a solution for ultimately dealing with anger. So there are many today who are seeking shelter under the poisonous vine of their anger.

But the Lord Jesus Christ came to destroy sin and death and the enemy on the cross of Calvary. That worm that was crushed on the Hill called Golgotha has the power to bring relief from our feelings of anger. How did the Lord Jesus Christ deal with his feelings of anger? He had every right to feel a righteous anger as he suffered the greatest injustice ever inflicted on a human being. But when they cruelly and unjustly nailed him to the cross, the first words out of his mouth were *Father, forgive them.* Christ did not harbor anger in his heart, he did not hold onto his anger tenaciously, he did not store his anger for a rainy day to be used for advantage - Christ released his anger by forgiving. And in doing this, he provided the positive example to balance Jonah's too often human response.

*Jonah seethed with anger - and this led him into the depths of depression. He sought the shelter of the poisonous vine of anger even though he didn't have any right to be angry.

*But God sent his crimson worm to tear down that vine. Jesus Christ came to this earth and died upon the cross of Calvary so that we might be freed from anger and the depression that it causes in our life through the power of forgiveness. We need to let it go. We need to give it up. We need to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we can be the most forgiving person in the world, and that will not guarantee that we will never suffer depression. Being human, we still will have emotional ups and downs in life. The Lord Jesus Christ himself suffered depression in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his journey to the cross. Matthew records Jesus saying, *my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death* in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:38). But often we bring upon ourselves burdens that God never intended for us to bear. We have already seen this in our study of guilt and stress - and now this week we see it in some areas of depression. If we harbor anger within - especially anger that we have no right to have - we are going to suffer depression just like Jonah did. But if we follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ - being quick to forgive others and let go our feelings of anger - then we will be enabled to live much more productive and fruitful lives for the Glory of God.