

## Jonah 4:1-11

It's been a dramatic three chapters, but we'll end where we started—with one man before the Lord. What happened to the guy who God used to spark the greatest revival in history? What happened to the guy who was saved from drowning by a giant fish who later spit him back onto the land? What happened to the guy who knew firsthand that God saw and punished his disobedience, and yet God wouldn't be thwarted and would still offer Jonah a second chance?

Surely, that guy understood God's mercy. Surely that guy would delight in obeying God from here on out. Surely that guy would have great trust in God's knowledge of him and care for him. Right?

**But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish for I know that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." The Lord said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"**

God's mercy on Nineveh makes Jonah angry (the Hebrew for "greatly displeased" says literally that Jonah thought God's relenting towards Nineveh was "exceedingly evil.") As many commentators have noted, Jonah appreciated when God saved him from his sin, but he hates it when God does the same for his enemies. Much like the Pharisees of the New Testament or the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jonah has an attitude of "What? You're going to save *them*. You're going to extend mercy to *them*?"

God's followers seem to have that attitude a lot. God doesn't wish destruction on the wicked, we do. Whereas God (who Nineveh had actually sinned against) forgave, Jonah (who Nineveh had responded well towards) did not.

What's interesting is that, in some ways, Jonah has a point. They form an idol-worshipping nation and a people that brutally kills its enemies, and God's going to just let them off? Nineveh's repentance won't last. The nation does not become permanent followers of the Lord, they will do much harm over the coming decades and they will eventually receive God's judgment because of their sin (see the book of Nahum). God, however, will not bring judgment on a repentant people. Though they do not repent perfectly and though their repentance may not last for generations, He looks at the heart, knows their humility and stays His hand.

Jonah's prayer is a bitter one, equally honest to his prayer in chapter two, but much more bitter. Contrast Jonah's request to die with Job's in Job 6:8-10. Job wants to die because of his pain but knows that he has done what he could to follow God. Jonah wants to die because he is unhappy following God. Jonah even goes back and tries to justify his former disobedience with an "I knew this would happen!"

He quotes, almost verbatim, God's name for himself in Exodus 34, proclaiming that God is abounding, overflowing in lovingkindness. Shockingly, though, Jonah claims this is a bad

thing and thus that God's character is faulty. Rather than rejoice in God's mercy, he claims to be wiser and more just than God and presumes to tell God what He should do.

**Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.**

Jonah leaves the city and his prophetic message and goes to watch what will happen. This is yet another display that though Jonah obeyed in preaching in Nineveh, his heart was still turned away from the people. After all, Jonah does not stay and instruct the people in how to follow the Lord (a ground fertile for spiritual growth if there ever was one), but goes out to watch, perhaps hoping the Lord would still choose to judge.

For the 3<sup>rd</sup> time in the book, God "appoints" something for Jonah, however. This time it is a plant and the shade from the plant makes Jonah extremely happy. The contrast is evident. Jonah was "greatly displeased" with the mercy that God offered sinners but "extremely happy" with the shady plant that God provided him. He cared much more for momentary happiness and relaxation than for the work of God or the souls of men. His thoughts were much more on the petty and on himself than the eternal and with others. Sound like anyone you know? Sound like you?

Tim Keller points out that Jesus, too, went to a hill outside the capital city. But instead of denouncing God's forgiveness, Jesus was announcing it. Yet again, we see Jonah as a weak shadow of the coming Messiah.

**But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."**

God appoints a worm (again, showing His control over even the minutest details of creation when desired) and Jonah's comfort is taken away. Then, God appoints a hot windstorm and it produces such weariness (something like an extreme migraine headache perhaps) that Jonah begs to die.

It's the third time in the book that Jonah has asked to die. First, it was on the boat when he knew of no other way to stop the storm. Then, it was when he realized God would not destroy Nineveh and he perhaps despaired of his role as a prophet. Finally, here, it is because he is sick and tired.

**Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death." Then the Lord said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"**

Again, God asks Jonah a question, “Do you have the right to be angry?” It is a common scene, perhaps. Rather than simply speak truth about our hearts and our sin, God asks questions and puts us in situations and our response displays the truth about us that He already knows.

Jonah responds by angrily asserting his rights. It’s as if he has forgotten that mere weeks or months earlier, he was drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, saved by a fish, and then the fish vomited him onto dry land. God then gave him a second chance at meaningful service. And he’s going to complain so bitterly about a sick day?

But what about us? Think how great of a salvation we have been given—destined for an eternity apart from God (as Ephesians says, “Without God and without hope in the world”), God saved us from our sin and ourselves for all eternity. But how often do we complain about life in this world that doesn’t go our way?

We will go and complain about things like teachers and bosses that don’t respect us or friends or families that don’t care well enough for us or not enough money or a phone that is too slow. It’s as if we say, “Jesus, thank you for saving me for eternity. But what I would really like is for the line at the DMV to move a little quicker.” If the Lord has saved us with such a great salvation, then what right have we to complain of anything else? Christians should be people who are overwhelmed with gratitude to their good God and king.

Finally, God points out to Jonah clearly what is by this point obvious to the reader. Jonah’s priorities are completely backwards and he has missed the majesty of God’s mercy. He has compassion on a plant (but only the one that benefited him; he doesn’t care about the other plants) but cares nothing for the souls of the Ninevites. Worse, he’s even disappointed that God has saved them.

God, on the other hand, amazes us with His compassion. He proves true to His character, which Jonah recognized. He responds immediately to repentance. He simultaneously cares for the masses, as well as the individual.

## **Conclusion**

The message of the book of Jonah is something about the failings of an individual man but much more about the grace and mercy of God. In the same way, the Bible is something about the failings of men but much more about the grace and mercy of God, who won’t be deterred by man’s failings but still determines to save them.

The book of Jonah is also the story of every believer. Our sin has brought a storm of God’s judgment upon us and someone must be offered up to that storm to save us. Then, salvation comes by grace (in Jonah’s case, in the form of a fish). At that point, our story changes. We now have the freedom and ability to obey God and become an instrument of His redemptive work in others. We also have the danger of becoming a self-focused individual, complaining about what we wish God would do and the petty things of this world.

God revealed Jonah’s unwillingness to extend to others the mercy that God had shown him. In the book of Jonah, God extends that warning against nationalism to the entire nation and proclaimed to Israel that His heart was not simply for their nation but for all humanity.

The book of Jonah also speaks to us today and asks us, “Will you be the Jonah of chapter 1—disobedient and stubborn—or chapter 2—accepting of His grace? Will you be the Jonah of chapter 3—an obedient instrument of God’s redemption or chapter 4—a self-focused spectator of God’s dealings on earth? Will you love the things God loves? Will you accept that the story is not simply about you?”

Through it all, the book of Jonah hints at another man who, like Jonah, would offer himself up to the storm, but not for his own sins but for others. It hints at another prophet who, like Jonah, would come back from the dead to offer forgiveness and life. It hints at Jesus.

## Suggested Study Outline<sup>1</sup>

- I. Pray
- II. Backdrop—What's come before (recall last week)
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
  - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
  - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
  - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
  - d. Why do you think Jonah doesn't trust God more? He was just saved by a fish after all.
  - e. Is it "mean" of God to give Jonah something pleasant only to take it away within hours? Do you think God ever does that to us?
  - f. Is it ok to be angry with God?
- V. Application Questions
  - a. How are you like Jonah in chapter 4?
  - b. When in the last days, weeks, months, year, have you complained or angry? Did you have the right to do that?
  - c. Is there any area in your life in which you are obeying God but are bitter about it?
  - d. The pagans do better at obeying God than Jonah does. Is there any way in modern America when non-believers obey God's ways better than Christians do?
  - e. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is that...
  - a. God's people often favor judgment over mercy but God does not
  - b. God's people often prioritize the temporary over the eternal but God does not
  - c. Obedience and even a lifetime of faith is not indicative of a spiritually healthy heart
- VIII. Pray

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<sup>1</sup> The questions here are suggestions. Pick the questions you want to use or create your own. The goal is to: 1) Get at the true meaning of the text; 2) Engage the student; 3) Push the student to apply the truth of the text. In addition, use sessions like this to ensure the student believes the Gospel and could study Scripture for himself/herself.