

Jonah 4: Divine compassion revealed

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Hello dear listeners,

Of all the books of the Bible, Jonah has the most unexpected and overlooked final chapter. The book doesn't end when Jonah is released from the fish; it doesn't end even after he went and preached to Nineveh. No. There is one more chapter, where the real lessons of the entire narrative are finally revealed. The main plot of the book is, God sovereignly, graciously pursues his own, reluctant, angry servant. And the question that presents itself at the close of this book is, will you *rejoice* in who the sovereign, gracious God really is?

Well by way of numbers, Jonah was the most successful prophet in the old covenant. Five words from him was enough to bring an enormous pagan city to enormous repentance.

This turn of events would lead us to expect the book to end in chapter 3 on a note of *triumph*, with something like, "And Jonah returned to his own land with great rejoicing." But no. Jonah 4:1 reads, "It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." It could also be translated, "It was exceedingly *evil* to Jonah." Jonah is unwilling to let *God* define good and evil. And Jonah is fuming. When the deliverance of Nineveh becomes a reality, Jonah responds with immense anger. Literally, it was "hot to him," something that will come back later.

Now, this turn of events was not a *surprise* to Jonah. That's what he says in verse 2. He prays to God again, and he complains. "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? This is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love, and relenting from disaster."

Jonah's got a real problem with God, and God's compassion. "I had it all right from the beginning! I just *knew* you would do something like this!" Well of course Jonah knew this; that list of divine attributes was revealed by the Lord most explicitly in Exodus 34:6-7 to Moses. Jonah's got no problem with God's love and mercy in itself. But he simply hates love and mercy shown to Gentiles, *especially* to evil Gentiles like the Ninevites. Jonah wants to see divine justice, but he sees divine mercy, and he is hot under his collar.

It takes him to the brink of despair. Vs. 3 reveals that his real problem was at the deepest level of his heart. "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to

live.” Jonah’s explosive anger about gospel mercy shows he’s willing to abandon his relationship with God if he doesn’t get what he wants. He would rather die than see God display his grace broadly.

Well, the Lord engages his self-deceived prophet in a counseling session. He asks a great question. Vs. 4, “Do you do well to be angry?” God wants Jonah to look inward, to examine his own heart. “Jonah, are you justified in your anger? Ask yourself, why am I angry?”

If Jonah had examined his heart, he might have discovered that his anger flowed from disappointed expectations about the Lord. But Jonah doesn’t take the opportunity to reflect. He refuses to answer God’s question, and his next move is to leave the city, sit down at a place east of the city, and build for himself a little booth, for shade. He’s in no hurry to go home. The end of verse 5 says that he sat in the shade “til he should see what would become of the city.” Even though God had declared a stay of execution, Jonah still wants to see what’s going to happen to it. And Jonah’s hope is that perhaps God would finally judge Nineveh after all. Or maybe Jonah is prepared to sit out the waiting period to see if the Ninevites would persevere in repentance.

God’s response to Jonah’s anger is grace *once again*. Vs. 6, “The LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort.” In his grace God miraculously appoints a giant plant to grow up and cover Jonah from the scorching Mesopotamian sun! Just as God appointed the fish to deliver Jonah from evil, so now he appoints the plant for the same purpose. God gives concrete evidence to Jonah that he still looks upon him with compassion.

And notice Jonah’s reaction. Vs. 6, “Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.” He’s hopping mad over the deliverance of the Ninevites, but over his own deliverance, he’s rejoicing with great joy. Doesn’t that repeat in no uncertain terms the condition of his heart? He would be quite satisfied to see a city of 120,000 souls perish in hell, but he is *overjoyed* by a plant whose only purpose is to give him some shade.

Let’s not be too hard on Jonah. What makes you exceedingly glad? A quiet evening to yourself? A momentary business success? A great meal? The things that make us exceedingly glad expose our primary values. Your joy can be a great tool to help you identify your idolatries more clearly. But what ought to make you rejoice most exceedingly? To do the will of the LORD.

Well, when the next day dawned, the Lord then appoints a worm to gnaw away at Jonah’s plant. I love this. The final act of the Lord’s sovereignty is so ordinary. He’s sovereign over the tiniest details of life.

And the same God also sovereignly appoints a scorching east wind to combine with the sun's powerful rays to fry Jonah's head. This wind is especially known throughout the Near East. It's a hot, dusty wind that can reach up to sixty miles an hour.

And then we come across another peek into Jonah's heart. Vs. 8, "He asked that he might die and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'" Again, we get Jonah's wish for death over life. You see what's happening? Jonah's *heart* was hot with anger. But now God is giving an environment that will match the heat in his heart. And this is not because God wants to destroy Jonah. He's pursuing him; he loves him enough to use the external heat to try to get Jonah to see his internal heat, and see the Lord's amazing patience with him.

And when the Lord comes back to him with the same counselling question as before, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" Jonah explodes with self-justification: "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." Infamous last words of Jonah in this book. Jonah's heart is so hard that it seems that God's method of instruction—his questions, his use of a withered plant to teach grace—none of it fizzes on Jonah.

Jonah had asked over and over for death, and you or I might have been tempted to give him what he was begging for. But the Lord didn't. Fittingly, he gets the final word in the book. And they are not words of anger, but of mercy and grace. He says, vs. 10, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night." This plant came totally as a gift to Jonah. Its total lifespan was no more than 24 hours. And Jonah's feelings for it were pure self-interest. But he's devastated to see it destroyed.

And then there's Nineveh. "Jonah, the plant appeared overnight, but Nineveh grew up over many months and years and has very many people and cattle in it. I created and tended to them for a long time. How much more does it deserve care, concern, pity! It has more than 120,000 people who are entrapped in their sinful lifestyles and who don't know how to get out, who cannot tell their right hand from their left. Don't I as Creator have the right to do with my creation as I please? What pleases me is grace. May I not spare them and show compassion toward them, evil though they are?" A city filled with people and cattle were of greater significance than Jonah's plant.

The Lord's question leaves us as readers totally engaged. Did Jonah finally come to repentance? Did he remain stubborn and bitter over the Lord's sovereignty and compassion? We don't get an answer, because the author is not so much interested in how Jonah responded, but in how we respond today. At its root, the question you and I are left to reckon with is, "Who is God?" We are left to

consider the nature of our Creator. To comprehend the message of his grace. For we are Jonah. We recognize ourselves in the story of this man's life.

And may we also recognize that we have even more reason to comprehend God's teaching than Jonah did. Because we have seen the ultimate act of the Father's compassion in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He was ready to die to show heaven's compassion toward us. Jonah was ready to die out of anger; Jesus was ready to die out of compassion.

And the God of compassion revealed his gospel grace so powerfully, on Golgotha. That's where Christ submitted himself to the Father's scorching wrath. He hung on the cross without shelter or shade, to deliver us from our evil...and to become *our* shelter from the judgment of God that we deserve.

It's this love and compassion that should convince us that God's love *is* good, that his wisdom is trustworthy, and his grace is right, always. Like our passage, I leave you with a question. Do you *know* God's heartbeat? Meditate on the compassion of God as taught in the Scriptures. As you do so, it will open up your heart to abandon unrighteous anger. You will find rest in your true refuge, Jesus himself, whose "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."