

“Ticked Off by God’s Grace” Jonah 4

- To Jonah's absolute dismay, the unexpected had happened. The bad guys, the people who plucked the eyes out of their defeated, who ripped out tongues and led their captives around with fish hooks through their noses, the brutal Assyrians had listened to Jonah's message. *Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned. And the Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*
- This was not supposed to happen. What about judgement? What about wrath? They are the enemy. What about vengeance? What about God's justice? What about God's own words? *"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.* What about that wickedness, God? The Ninevites were supposed to get theirs. God was supposed to destroy them. And instead? They repent? Who do they think they are? They really believed the God of Israel might be merciful to them? The nerve. The gall. Why should God be kind to them? Who have they ever been kind to? Why should God be merciful to them? Who have they ever shown mercy to? Why should God be gracious to them? Who have they ever extended grace to?
- *When God saw what [the Ninevites] did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*
- And as Jonah walked the city, as he looked at the faces; those grimy faces with caked on dirt Jonah saw the white gutters made by the tears of repentance running down their dark cheeks and Jonah realized his worst nightmare had come true. His country's worst nightmare had come true. God was not going to destroy the Ninevites. And Jonah's blood began to boil. The little vein above his left temple began to protrude. Jonah's incensed. As someone has said, "Jonah finds that the time-fuse does not work on the prophetic bomb he planted in Nineveh."¹ And Jonah's ticked.
- **Jonah 4:1.** *But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. The text literally reads, and it was exceedingly evil to Jonah. And the anger that boiled up from within spilled over into a bile filled, angry prayer to the detestable traitor God who has betrayed Jonah and betrayed Israel.*
- **Jonah 4:2** *[Jonah] 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*

¹ Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, p. 227.

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.'

- Now, finally, after all this time, after the running, and the storm, and the fish, and the three-day in the fish, and the stench, and the blackness, and the vomiting, after the long, arduous journey through the desert to Nineveh, after the preaching and the proclaiming, after witnessing this overwhelming repentance, one of the great revivals the world has ever seen, the bitter truth comes out. The reason for Jonah's running comes out. If Nineveh responded to his message God would spare them. That's why Jonah ran. He could foresee the unthinkable coming; the enemy pardoned. *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.*
- Do you realize what Jonah prays for in [verse 2](#), this is darkly bitter and macabre prayer? *Now O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.* It's a death wish. God, kill me. Take my life. End it. Why? Jonah' throws a temper tantrum because God has been merciful to someone else. Jonah's prayer reveals how utterly far away his heart is from God's divine heartbeat. The thing that would have caused God pain, Nineveh's destruction, would have given Jonah pleasure. Do you see the absurd irony in Jonah's prayer? Jonah requests death because God has been merciful. The cause of Jonah's discontent and anger and pain is God's goodness. The logic is asinine, isn't it?
- God's forgiveness of the Ninevites has so undermined Jonah's preconceived view of God's justice that he no longer wishes to live.² Whereas before, when God's mercy was for him, Jonah delighted in it. Now when God's mercy is for someone else, especially the enemy, it makes Jonah choke. The one who praised God's mercy in chapter 2 turns around and deplors that same mercy in chapter 4.³ It's too much. He is furious with God. Jonah would rather die than see God be merciful to a people he despised.
- I would like to think that we're different than Jonah, but we're not. I want you to think for a second about a time when God was visibly gracious and merciful to someone else, someone other than you. How did you respond?
- Your coworker gets the promotion, you don't. That's God's grace to him. How do you respond? Your friend's car breaks down and someone fixes it for them for free. You? You gotta dip into your retirement fund to pay [Mr. Goodwrech](#). That's God's grace for your friend. How do you respond? The slacker kid at school gets an extension and turns in her paper late, and gets an A. You turn yours in on time and get docked a grade for a spelling error.

² Joyce Baldwin, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 584.

³ Allen, p. 227.

How do you respond? You've been unemployed for 8 months and your neighbor, the one who can be a royal pain in the you-know-what, the one who has never held down a job, is laid off for two weeks and is hired again right away. How do you respond?

- Your little brother hauls off and slugs you and mom and dad show mercy. You used to get spanked for the same thing. How do you respond? The church down the street experiences the blessing and favor of God. How do you respond? The guy in the fast lane who's twenty over slips on by while you're pulled over for a broken headlight. How do you respond? The family on welfare eats better than you do. How do you respond? God blesses the ministry and service of someone who's "less talented" than you are. How do you respond?
- Do you rejoice and delight in God's grace and mercy and blessing for others? Or is God only "good" when he's good to you? I think if we're really honest with ourselves we might be a bit more like Jonah than we realize; our hearts are just as far away from God's divine heartbeat as Jonah's.
- Jesus dealt with this same faulty heart attitude through the parable of the prodigal son. Do you remember the story?
- **Luke 15:11-32.** *"There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'*
- *20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* *22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'* So they began to celebrate.

- 25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"
- The older son, that's Jonah all over again, isn't it? That's us. We're the older son. We see God's grace and mercy for someone else and first response is, God, what about me? We love God's grace and mercy when it's for us. But when someone else receives it? Especially someone whom we think doesn't deserve it? And all of a sudden, just like Jonah, God's goodness and mercy and grace become bitter pills.
- The father's response to the older son is how you and I should respond when you see God being gracious and merciful to others. It's how Jonah should have responded. "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"
- God's reply to **Jonah 4:4** is as gentle and as loving as the father's words to his older son. You don't hear God say, "hey, wake up you idiot—I have been gracious to you too. Remember the storm? Remember the fish? Remember your second chance." You hear nothing like that from God. *But the Lord replied, and I think sweetly, even gently, 'Have you any right to be angry?'* What right does Jonah have to be angry at God's mercy toward the Ninevites? And the answer, obviously, is no right. And the same is true for us. Who are we to tell God who he can or can't show mercy and grace to?
- God says of himself, *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*⁴ And we are to marvel at and rejoice and celebrate God's mercy and his grace and his compassion when we see it because *He alone is the LORD, and there is no other.*⁵
- **Jonah 4** is not about the Ninevites. It's about Jonah. It's about church people, the older son in the prodigal story. It's about you and me and our selfishness when we see God being good to someone else—especially when that goodness leads to repentance and even further blessing.
- Jonah's gall and anger at the Ninevites turning from their sins and repenting echoes another of Jesus' parables in **Matthew 20**. Do you remember what

⁴ Exodus 33:19

⁵ Isaiah 45:5

Jesus said? Jesus said, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. 3 "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing.

- 6 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 7 "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' 8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' 9 "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius.
- 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Transition

When God's generously pours out his goodness and mercy and blessing for someone else may we rejoice. And may we learn this lesson more quickly than Jonah himself learned it. I love what happens next. Back to **Jonah 4**.

- **Jonah 4:5**. 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. 6 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. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 8 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." 9 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."
- Seeing that God intended to be merciful Jonah heads out of the city to a hill east of the city so that he might wait out the forty days and see how this whole Ninevite repentance thing resolves itself. I think he thinks that if the

repentance isn't sustained or lasting Nineveh still might get theirs. God still might destroy them. You can almost picture Jonah with a sheepish grin on his face as he contemplates Nineveh's destruction, popcorn and cold drink in hand, ready for some heavenly pyrotechnics.

- Forty days is a long time to wait exposed to the elements; so Jonah builds a booth or a shack to protect himself from the vicious drying winds, the sirocco, and from heatstroke and the blazing sun. And as he puts the finishing touches on his one room bungalow can you imagine Jonah's shock as this Jack and the Beanstalk like vine sprouts up to shade him.
- **Jonah 4:6** *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. God is gracious to Jonah and Jonah eats it up. "God is so good. God is so good. God is so good, he's so good to me. I love you God and I love this vine. I love you, I love you, I love you."*
- But the next morning, less than 24 hours after the vine sprouts up, God decides to give Jonah a taste of his own bad theology. God treats the vine as Jonah wished God would treat the Ninevites. Jonah demanded harshness and judgment and destruction so that's exactly what God does.⁶
- **Jonah 4:7** *But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 8 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." 9 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."*
- Even though Jonah wished harshness and judgment and destruction, when that bad theology is played out for him, he hates it. *"It would be better for me to die than to live."* Jonah's theology of grace for him and doom and gloom for everybody else is deplorable theology. When the tables are turned, when he gets a taste of his own medicine, it's too much to take.
- You know what? Don't be surprised. This same bad theology is all too prevalent today. It's the theology summarized by [Jonathan Swift's](#) satirical poem:

We are God's chosen few,
All others will be damned;
There is no place in heaven for you,
We can't have heaven crammed

- The whole vine and worm thing is a living, enacted parable meant to teach Jonah a lesson about the rightness of God's actions toward Nineveh and the wrongness of Jonah's. The reason God is right to treat Nineveh the way he

⁶ Allen, p. 233.

does, with mercy and grace, is because they are no worse than Jonah, they are no less deserving than Jonah—as hard as that is for Jonah to comprehend.

- God doesn't dole out punishment and mercy as if some were more deserving of one and not the other. No one, none of us are worthy of God's grace and mercy. We all deserve punishment because of our sin. That anyone receives mercy at all is because he is a *gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity*.
- So God must have concern for Nineveh. He created them and they are perishing in their sin. And in the same way that Jonah grieved over the destruction of his precious little vine God grieves at the thought of his creation, the Ninevites, perishing in their moral ignorance.
- **Jonah 4:10** *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. 11 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?"*
- The book of Jonah ends with an ironic question raised by God: If Jonah won't allow God to have compassion on Nineveh for the sake of the people whom God created and cares for; will not Jonah at least allow God to have compassion on Nineveh because of the animals? After all, Jonah was willing to have compassion on a stupid little plant.⁷
- It's as if God is saying, Jonah you felt strongly about the plant, a plant you never tended or cared for and only superficially loved. How do you think I feel? If you felt saddened, even angered by the death of your plant, this is how I feel about Nineveh, only a thousand times more so. All those people, I made them. I have cherished them and watched out for them and wooed them for years. "Nineveh has cost me no end of effort, and they mean the world to me. Your pain for your little plant, Jonah, is nothing compared to my pain, my anguish when I contemplate their destruction."⁸
- And the unstated, unspoken answer to this question "*should I not be concerned about that great city*" is an obvious, yes. God must be concerned about Nineveh. By showing mercy to them God was only doing for Nineveh what Jonah insisted God do for the plant, namely save it because of its importance.
- How close is your heart to God's divine heartbeat for the unbelieving world—especially those we so quickly deem as unworthy? And you can fill in the

⁷ ESV Study Bible, note on Jonah 4:10-11

⁸ Allen, p. 234.

blank with the person or people group that if they showed up and sat down here this morning you'd be like—uh, uh, no, not here, this is not the place for you.

- Does your heart break for that person? Do you ache? Are you in anguish for them? How do you really feel about those *who cannot tell their right hand from their left*, whose lives are a mess because they simply don't know any better? And more importantly, what are you doing about it? How are you serving them, loving them, caring for them? Or would you rather see that they got theirs? What if God had treated you that way?

Conclusion

- God expects his servants, Jonah, you, me, to be merciful to others because we have received mercy ourselves. You can almost hear the echo of **James 2:13** in this last chapter of Jonah; *judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful*. And if there's anything that should characterize the people of God, it's mercy.
- How quickly we forget where we once were ourselves. *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*⁹ And so praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! *In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*¹⁰
- *Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.*¹¹

⁹ 1 Peter 2:10

¹⁰ 1 Peter 1:3

¹¹ Jude 1:2