

Jonah 4

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 2 And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. 3 Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

5 Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. 6 Now 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. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." 10 And the LORD said, "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. 11 And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

This is the most difficult of the four chapters in the book of Jonah. Maybe some people have a hard time believing that Jonah was able to survive for three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish. These people doubt God's miraculous provision. Others are not convinced that the entire city genuinely repented. These folks doubt God's miraculous mercy. I don't have issues with either of these. My struggle comes in doubting God's mercy towards Jonah. That part doesn't make sense to me.

Why wasn't Jonah struck dead on the spot? I realize that Jonah was a true prophet of the Lord and as such, he would not be the recipient of God's judgmental wrath. But there are plenty of believers in the Bible who were struck down in Godly discipline who were much more innocent less than Jonah. Like this prophet from 1 Kings.

And he said, "I may not return with you, or go in with you, neither will I eat bread nor drink water with you in this place, 17for it was said to me by the word of the LORD, 'You shall neither eat bread nor drink water there, nor return by the way that you came.'" 18And he said to him, "I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the LORD, saying, 'Bring him back with you into your house that he may eat bread and drink water.'" But he lied to him. 19So he went back with him and ate bread in his house and drank water. And after he had eaten bread and drunk, he saddled the donkey for the prophet whom he had brought back. 24 And as he went away a lion met him on the road and killed him. (1 Kings 13:16-19; 23-24)

This young prophet was lied to by another prophet of the Lord who tricked him into disobeying and was killed by a lion as a result. The of course in the New Testament there is Ananias and Sapphira.

But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. (Acts 5:9-10).

At least Ananias and Sapphira lied to God, even though the discipline was as harsh as it comes. But Jonah! Jonah did so much worse than any of these three. The first three chapters are bad enough. There is enough evidence to convict him of gross negligence and disobedience but then there’s chapter four.

The more I read this passage the more disturbed I become. Jonah seemed to have repented while in the belly of the fish. Jonah seemed to have been obeying when he preached the message in Nineveh. But then Jonah’s reaction is inexcusable and unlike anything in Scripture. He essentially prays that God would kill him. His anger invalidates his obedience. It was begrudging obedience—a forced obedience.

Then it only gets worse. Jonah set up camp outside the city waiting to see what would happen. He already saw the results of his preaching—the entire city turned from their evil and to the Lord. Jonah already stated that the Lord was gracious and forgiving. Why did he wait to see what would happen? Did he think that God might still bring judgment upon the city? I think he planned to set up camp under his shelter and count down the days. I can see Jonah marking each day by carving it into a dead tree with a stone. One. Two. Did he hope against hope that the city would be destroyed? Was he waiting to see fire and brimstone fall on Nineveh like it did on Sodom and Gomorrah? Jonah was a prophet of the Lord. He would have known the Sodom and Gomorrah story and was hoping against hope that it would happen to Nineveh.

The only thing that brought any pleasure to Jonah in the entire story was the plant that shaded his pitiful head. His home nation of Israel would not repent even though many prophets warned them yet one simple message by one prophet brought this foreign enemy to their knees before the Lord.

Jonah is truly angry at the Lord. To Jonah, the Lord is too good. Also, his goodness seems arbitrary. Why would Nineveh repent but not Samaria? Why would Assyria repent but not Israel? Why did “altar call” to an evil city who did not have any Jewish background or other pre-evangelism type of preparedness would respond so quickly, so radically and so universally? Last week we concluded it was sovereign grace.

Furthermore, why did the Lord spare Jonah? Why didn’t the Lord “appoint” a lion and maul Jonah? I find myself almost taking on some of Jonah’s anger because the Lord did not discipline Jonah in a similar way that Jonah was angry for not bringing judgment on Nineveh.

So there's much to learn from this sometimes frustrating but fascinating book. Let me see if I can drive home some final lessons.

1. God is all-powerful and all-loving

Jonah always knew these truths to be very real. Notice God's sovereign action all throughout the book. The Lord did each of these directly and purposefully.

- Hurlled a great wind upon the sea (1:4)
- Appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah (1:17)
- spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out (2:10)
- appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah (4:6)
- appointed a worm that attacked the plant (4:7)
- appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah (4:7)

From the moment the great tempest swept over the Mediterranean Sea, Jonah knew that God was in control. He saw God's hand at every turn. There was never a doubt in his mind.

Jonah was also fully aware that God was all-loving and merciful. His description of God is perfect and beautiful. *for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.* Spoken with a right heart, this would be a statement of worship. But it was far from worship.

It is such a perfect description of God because it was essentially lofted off the page of Scripture. Look how similar it is to Exodus 34:6. The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Jonah knew his Bible.

Jeremiah came after Jonah but this perfectly captures the way God operates with his people. *5 Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. (Jeremiah 18:5-8)*

God relented. As a prophet of the Lord, Jonah was fully aware of God's character of mercy and grace. Grace is God giving us what we do not deserve and mercy is God not giving us what we do deserve. Nineveh deserved judgment but received forgiveness instead.

God is all-powerful and he is all-loving. If you are to have doubts about God, it was almost always fall into either of these two categories. Which area do you tend to doubt? Do you doubt that he has absolute sovereign power over the sea, fish, storms, wind and every atom in the universe? Do you doubt that he has the power to help in your time of need? Or are you more likely to doubt his goodness? He has the power to help you, but he chooses not to help you, so we question his love.

If you were drowning in a pool and I was standing on the side with one of those long hook things on a pole, am I not morally obligated to save you? If I did not, wouldn't you conclude that I was heartless? This is the way some Christians respond to God if he does not rescue them from every

trial—they doubt his goodness. But Jonah never did. He was convinced to the core of his being that God was all-powerful and all-loving. Jonah’s issues remind us that...

2. We must also love these attributes; right knowledge of God is insufficient.

Long before God ever sent him to Nineveh, Jonah had right doctrine. We can see him sitting in an ordination council. “Jonah, is God all-powerful?” Of course he is. Anyone who can create the world out of nothing has absolute power. “Jonah, is God loving and merciful?” Yes, the evidence is overwhelming. Our people have a long history of deep rebellion yet he keeps leading us back to himself with love and mercy. I think he would have even gotten the next question right. “Jonah, do you love these attributes of God—his power and love?” Absolutely. That’s why I serve him and obey his voice. I get frustrated with our people as well but the Lord loves them without end. “Jonah, what would you think if God gave his mercy to your enemies?” Do you mean the Assyrians? I hate the very thought of it.

Many translation shave the word “displeased in verse one. *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly.* However, the literal translation is: It was evil to Jonah, a great evil. This Hebrew word is translated as “evil” the vast majority of the time. I agree that it is appropriate to translate it as “displeased”ⁱ but we should also know the force behind this word.

And the crazy thing about Jonah is that he never tried to hide his disgust. He was so angry, he wanted God to kill him. Psychologists would have a heyday with Jonah. The word Angry/anger appears 6 times. Jonah appears to have a type of suicidal death wish.

3--Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

8-- And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

9--“Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”

1:12-- “*Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.*”

Jonah’s doctrine was completely correct but his response to this doctrine was all messed up. Hear this: you cannot love God rightly unless you love him correctly. Otherwise, you are loving your own perception of God as opposed to loving him as he truly is. Some evangelicals have the opposite problem that Jonah had. Jonah loved God’s wrath but did not completely embrace God’s mercy. Today, far too many evangelicals love God’s mercy but do not embrace his wrath.

Here is the last point in our Statement of Faith.ⁱⁱ

10. We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.

This is of course, the doctrine on Hell. I have asked you this in the past but I will say it again. Do you love this doctrine? Now let me be clear. I am not asking if you love the fact the unbelievers are sent to Hell. This is horribly grievous. However, unbelievers are sent to Hell because of

God's holiness and hatred of sin. They are sent to Hell because they rejected the perfect, substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They are sent to Hell because they have completely rejected God.

Therefore, God's very character and the gospel are all bound up with this statement on Hell. If we love God's holiness we must also love this doctrine. If we love Christ's sacrificial love for us, we must also love this doctrine. And if we don't, we are like closet liberals. Theological liberals reject most of the beliefs that we hold dear. But if we do not love all of the Bible, then we are secretly rejecting some of it, but don't have the guts to say so.

Moreover, mercy without wrath makes no sense. Even Jonah knew this. If the Ninevites has not been under judgment—the very thing Jonah was hoping would last—then there would have been no opportunity for God to have shown mercy. If there is no hell or wrath, then mercy ceases to exist. Can you see this? If God did not have the right to destroy Nineveh then he has no power to give them mercy. Mercy and wrath are inseparable from one another. It is not enough to merely believe right doctrine about God, we must also love these truths.

This is why I have titled this final message as “I am Jonah.” We are. It is easy to throw stones at Jonah; all too easy. I don't like him. He's selfish, he lacks compassion, he complains, he disobeys, he rationalizes to God's face and he picks and chooses the parts of God's truth that he likes best. I am Jonah. This book is a mirror to my soul.

Jonah is like Romans 7. In Romans 7, Paul says, “I don't do the things I want to do and I do the things I don't want to do.” We know that is our life as well, but this is stated as a general principle. Paul did not give us any specifics about his behavior. But Jonah is a list of bad behaviors. Jonah is Romans 7 but with many specific examples of what you did but should not have and did not do, but should have. It's one long illustration of Romans 7.

3. God will use any means necessary to get our attention.

A great assignment, a great tempest, a great fish, a great mercy, a great shady vine, a great east wind. If you were reading this story for the first time ever, then you would have been filled with rejoicing in chapter two. Finally Jonah repented! There will be a happy ending to Jonah's miserable disobedience after all. But then you see chapter four, verse one—*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.* The more Jonah resisted the more means God had to use to get his attention. A storm was not enough so he threw him into the sea. The sea was not enough so he sent a fish. On and on it went.

A good many of you have made it to Dave Hart's Sunday evening study on How God Changes People. This is the sort of thing that Dave says is all over Scripture. And he's right! Jonah resists so God gave him a “trigger.” The circumstances and the people which trigger us are far less than what Jonah had to deal with. You and I have, usually at most, a few dozen people who are our triggers. But Jonah had an entire city of 120,000 people as his triggers. The people of Nineveh were the mirror into his soul and he did not like what he saw. So he blamed God. *That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.* The content of this complaint doesn't sound so bad. That's like someone saying to you, “I'm sick of it. I can't be

around you anymore, you're just too nice!" I have a friend whose wife divorced him because he was too nice. That's not exactly what she said but it was true.

That's the sad part of this story. Men and women all over the pages of Scripture mess up. They commit murder, adultery, espionage, ethnic cleansing, terrorism and worse. But many of them learn a lesson as a result. David only committed adultery once. Abraham only told others that Sarah was his sister twice. ;-) You get the point. They mess up and learn. But despite the endless things that God throws Jonah's way, he doesn't seem to learn his lesson. If anything, he only get more obstinate, more resistant.

Once again, I am Jonah. Which is why the next principle is so important.

4. God is longsuffering to the believer and unbeliever alike.

We are shocked when God offers mercy to the undeserving Ninevites but speaking personally, I am more shocked when God repeatedly showed mercy to Jonah. That's the steadfast love Jonah confessed was true of God. You have probably heard of the Hebrew word here—*hesed*. You actually make a sound in the back of your throat when you say it—*hesed*.

Even when His people sin against Him and face the consequences of their sin, they may still appeal to the Lord's *hesed*, as the writer of Lamentations does in the midst of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Surrounded by the evidence of the Lord's faithfulness to judge wickedness, rebellion, and sin, he casts himself on the unchanging character of God, affirming, "The *hesed* of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness"ⁱⁱⁱ

Jonah made liberal use of the Lord's *hesed*. He did not want this mercy to be given to his enemies but he was cavalier with his own use of it. He leaned heavily on God's *hesed*. By the way he spoke to God, you can tell he was either insane or else he really depended on God's *hesed*.

God's *hesed* means that he is sovereign but he is also so gentle. After receiving a bitter complaint, God asked, "Do you do well to be angry?" God's gentle questioning, just like he did with Adam and Eve. "Where are you, Adam? He told you that you were naked?" Gentle questions. Penetrating questions, but oh so gentle.

If Jonah were the young prophet he would have been killed by a lion. If Jonah was in place of Ananias, he would have been struck dead. But so would you and me, for we are Jonah. We need God to send us circumstances and people to continually get our attention. We need him to help us to love him and to love his character to its fullest sense. We need him to be gentle with us, even in our rebellion or should I say, especially in our rebellion.

The Lord is *a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster*. Job argued with God for forty chapters and Jonah argued with God for four chapters, but what was the difference? Job repented at the end but Jonah did not. I wish we knew the rest of the story and someday we will, but Job is our example to follow and not Jonah.

But the bottom line is that Jonah is a mirror into our soul and the Lord is waiting with everlasting love to turn to him.

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November 15, 2015

ⁱ For example, in 4:6-- *to save him from his discomfort*; the word for discomfort is literally = evil, same word as in verse 1). It would be strange to translate this as “to save him from his evil.” So discomfort and displeasing are acceptable translation but it is important to understand the root word of evil in both cases.

ⁱⁱ <http://go.efca.org/resources/document/efca-statement-faith>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/loyal-love-hesed/>