

God Relents, Jonah Resents

Jonah 4:1-11

We learn in chapter 4 that Jonah has not stopped fleeing from God. It's just the mode of his flight that has changed. In chapter 4, he is fleeing from the presence of the Lord relationally. In fact, he is downright angry with God and makes no secret of it. God, however, in mercy pursues his angry prophet. God has pursued Jonah throughout the book, and, in his merciful pursuit of Jonah, blessing has come to the unsuspecting sailors on the ship (ch 1) and the evil Ninevites (ch 3). More astounding than God's mercy on the Ninevites is his endless endeavor to show kindness to Jonah.

In chapter 4, Jonah's anger is in the way of his ability to feel, to know, and to appreciate the God of all mercy. God is moving toward Jonah and teaching him about divine compassion. Jonah's anger may be rooted in the thought that God is abandoning him and his people by saving the Ninevites. We see, as readers, that God is far from abandoning Jonah, He is moving toward Jonah.

Jonah must come to see that God's mercy to the world is not God abandoning his people but is, at least, part of God's plan in extending mercy to his people in the first place (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 19:5-6). God has a mercy mission, and we not simply recipients of it but agents in it.

From Jonah's perspective, God moving toward him in mercy does not feel a lot like what we might imagine mercy to feel like. Sometimes mercy feels like what Barabbas must have felt like when the guards came, opened his cell, released his shackles, and said, *You may go now*. That must have been what it felt like in Nineveh—overthrown, overwhelmed, overcome, turned in-side-out and up-side-down by mercy, life-changing life-giving mercy.

Mercy, however, sometimes feels like God confronting your prejudice, hurling a great storm on your sea, swallowing you with a fish for 3 days and nights, and then making you go someplace you don't want to go and do something you don't want to do. God's mercy may feel like God is nicer to your sworn enemies than he is to you, leaving you out in the sun to bake in a scorching east wind. Oh, but that is mercy.

Mercy is God relentlessly pursuing you, because he is unwilling to let whatever is in the way of you knowing his kindness and affection and deep love for you keep

you from the full experience of knowing him. God was coming near to Jonah, but Jonah had this anger right in the middle of him. It was spuing out, pushing everybody away and threatening to destroy Jonah himself. God is going to root his anger out him.

Two times the Lord asked Jonah, “*Do you do well to be angry*” (4, 9)? What a question! Either way he answers, he is forced to admit he is angry. If he answers, *No*, which is what he should answer, he on his way to dealing with his anger, getting it out of the way of relating to God and others.

God is taking Jonah to anger management school, helping him realize, analyze, and deal with his unreasonable anger and the merciful character of God.

You can be angry, or you can be merciful. Choose mercy.

1. Jonah is angry at God, challenging the rightness of God’s mercy (1-4).

Chapter 4 starts with a narrator’s note that Jonah was extremely displeased with God because of the response of the Ninevites to his preaching. They repented (3:5a,8b), and Jonah suspected God had relented (3:10) from his *fierce anger* (3:9). This made Jonah hopping mad. He is angry at God.

Robert Jones in his book, *Uprooting Anger*, identifies three categories of anger: *divine anger, human righteous anger, and human sinful anger*.¹ Of course, we understand divine anger, but we easily confuse human righteous anger and human sinful anger.² Righteous anger in some way reflects divine anger. It has nothing to do with my pet peeves.

The self-justification of anger is a good indication it’s sinful. A settled disposition of anger is poison to your soul and to your relationships.

Anger at God is never right, but it is much too common.³ When we hear people say things like, *It’s ok to be angry at God. Just let it out*. Try that with your Mom. Dear friend, anger at God needs to be confessed as sin, and our prayer needs to be for

¹ Robert Jones, *Uprooting Anger: Biblical Help for a Common Problem* (P&R Publishing, 2005) 18.

² You have to be careful here. Many angry people try to defend their anger by saying, *The Bible says, “Be angry and do not sin.”* They may conclude, it’s a sin not to be angry. That same verse qualifies the exhortation, *Do not let the sun go down on your anger* (Eph. 4:26). And in the same context, the exhortation is given, *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger...be put away from you* (Eph 4:31). The text is a caution about human anger. It gets sinful quickly. Deal with it now. Get rid of it.

³ Many, in fact most, of the psalms are laments, but they are not anger-vents. As God’s people, we need to learn to lament without being angry. Laments come out of faith; anger comes out of sinful hearts.

God to help us think rightly about him. God does not do evil. Anger at God accuses God of doing evil.

A. Jonah accuses God of doing evil.

In verse 1, the word *displeased* is the word elsewhere translated *evil* in the Book. You may have a footnote in your Bible that offers, *it was exceedingly evil to Jonah*, as a literal reading of verse 1.

Jonah in his anger is accusing God of doing evil, moral evil, in showing mercy to Nineveh.

Robert Jones, again, defines anger as *our whole-personed active response of negative moral judgment against perceived evil*.⁴ Jonah fits Jones's definition of an angry person. His anger is whole-personed. You can see it in his body and hear it in his words. He is hot with anger. He is responding with a negative moral judgment against what he perceives as an evil, namely the mercy of God to the Ninevites.

Jonah is on the horns of a moral dilemma. He is happy for God to show mercy to him, as undeserving as he was, but to extend that mercy to his enemies was a moral flaw in God.

Anger at God is to accuse God of moral evil. It keeps us from receiving God's love for us.

B. Jonah puts himself in the place of God.

The word *anger* in 4:1 is the same as the word as *fierce* in 3:9. A good rendering of it is *inflamed* or *burning*. You can see the roles are switched. The Ninevites rightly assessed God's disposition toward them as *fierce anger*. They desired mercy, and God was angry. Now Jonah's disposition toward God is *burning anger*, and God is acting in mercy.

In our anger, handing down our justice, we put ourselves in the place of God. It is not as if God acting in mercy means he has lost his ability to do justly. There is no conflict between divine mercy and divine justice. To act in mercy is a very costly thing for God. He put his Son forward as a propitiation for our sins that he might be both just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus (Rom 3:25-26). We are not able enact divine justice, but we have been called to be those who announce the good news of God's mercy.

⁴ Jones, 15.

C. Jonah's anger leads him to self-justification.

Sinful human anger seeks to justify itself. The justification of self is the telltale signal of sin.

1) Self-justification is self-centered.

When the Ninevites repented, Jonah prayed (2-3). His prayer for the first time explicitly reveals the motive behind his flight in chapter 1. *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* (2). This prayer is as self-centered as the one in chapter 2 when he was in the fish's belly. He uses the first-person pronoun 7 times in the English text (9 times in Hebrew, 2-3).

Jonah's self-centeredness shows the idolatry of anger. When we don't get what we want, when we want it, how we want it, we are angry. Idols always disappoint.

Jonah views the merciful nature of God as a character flaw in the divine Person. Jonah takes Exodus 32 and 34, the bookend chapters of Israel's sin with the golden calf and puts them together. In Exodus 32, *The LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people* (Ex. 32:14). In Exodus 34, he reveals why he relented, *He is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love* (Jn 4:2; cf. Ex. 34:6-7).⁵

This revelation of the character of God becomes the lens through which God is to be understood and through which we read the OT. Jonah knows this, but he is denying God the right to be merciful to his enemies. He is happy for God to be merciful to him and to Israel, both of whom had yet to repent, but he feels it is a character flaw in God for him to extend mercy to Nineveh.

2) Self-justification is self-pity.

Jonah's anger is destroying him, so much so, he prayed for God to take his life from him (3).⁶ Self-pity is so, well, pitiful. Jonah is saying, I can't watch you

⁵ Both Jonah and Joel pick-up this Exodus 32 and 34 combination, and Jonah seems to be quoting Joel 2:13. You will find the Exodus 34 text in Micah, Nahum, Malachi and other place in the OT.

⁶ One other time in Scripture a prophet prayed to die. When Elijah was fleeing from Jezebel, he sat under a broom tree and asked the LORD that he might die, *O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers* (1Kgs 19:4). When Jonah prays, *Take my life from me*, he is quoting the words of Elijah. This direct quote means for us to draw a contrast between Elijah and Jonah. Elijah prayed to die because he felt he failed at his task. He was not so proud as to think he could succeed when his fathers failed. Jonah's mission was highly successful, and he was angry at God because of the success of it. He took it as a personal affront.

extend mercy to them. So, if you are going to be merciful, just take my life from me, *for it is better for me to die than to live* (3).

So, the LORD responds to Jonah's prayer with a question, *Do you do well to be angry* (4)? The answer to that question is, *No*. But Jonah leaves the encounter without answering. In all his anger and the false comfort of his self-justifying rage, Jonah walked away from God. This is indicated in him settling East of the city (5). East is away from God.

2. God pursues Jonah, asserting the rightness of his mercy (5-11).

Angry at the response of the Ninevites to his preaching, and angry at God for his merciful response to their repentance, Jonah registered his complaint (2-3), went outside the city (5a), and held out hope that God may yet come to his senses and destroy Nineveh (5b). What a picture! Jonah does not want to talk with God about his anger. In his pride and anger, he withdraws relationally. Jonah is anything but an agent of mercy.

Jonah is again fleeing from the Presence of the LORD, but God is pursuing him. God's pursuit of Jonah, throughout the book, has been characterized by God *appointing* things. In 1:4, he hurled a great wind upon the sea. In 1:17, he appointed a fish. Now, in rapid succession, he appoints a plant (6), a worm (7), and a scorching east wind (8). There's a bit of irony between obedience nature and the disobedience of Jonah. But God is teaching Jonah about the rightness of his mercy.

As we see the drama of God's merciful pursuit of Jonah unfold, we understand something of the relentless mercy of God never giving up and never leaving his children. The design of God's merciful pursuit of Jonah is to draw him out of his self-centered, self-exalting anger that he might rest and rejoice in the mercy of God. God's strategy with Jonah is a two-pronged approach.

A. God exposes Jonah's self-centeredness.

Jonah's booth was lacking in personal comforts, but in a day's time a plant grew up over Jonah and shaded him (6). The LORD appointed the plant *to save Him from his discomfort* (6b). *Discomfort* is the same word as *displeased* (1), the word for *evil* (ray'eh).⁷ The word, as so many words in Jonah, has double meaning.⁸ We can

⁷ See 1:2,7,8; 3:8,10x2; 4:1,2,6.

⁸ Cf. *overthrown* (3:4)

interpret it as the LORD appointed the plant to shade Jonah from his distress or to save Jonah from his wickedness, referring to Jonah's unjustified anger (cf. 1).⁹

Jonah was *exceedingly glad* because of the plant (6b). Jonah's self-centeredness is exposed here. The only things that have made Jonah glad are the fish and the plant. The one saved his life and the other gave him personal comfort.

The question comes to mind, Did Jonah not suspect the sudden growth of this shady plant to be a bit shady? Jonah is really happy about the plant. Perhaps, Jonah thought, *This is my day*.¹⁰ Or maybe he thought, *Aha, God is coming around to seeing things my way*.

But then there is the worm (7). Right in the middle of the apple of Jonah's eye was a worm. One day of shade and then the worm. In a day, the plant, Jonah's joy, his reason for living, withered.

Then the scorching east wind and the sun beating down on Jonah's head were more than he could take (8a). So again, he prayed that he might die saying, *It is better for me to die than to live* (8b). He used this same line in his first prayer, *It is better for me to die than to live* (3b).

Do you see the path of the self-centered person? He has increasingly become more petty, pouty, and pathetic. He first prayed to die because of the possibility of God being merciful to the Ninevites. Now, he is reduced to desiring death because the plant withered, because he lost his personal comfort.

This the life of the angry man. He is self-centered and becomes more and more consumed with himself and his personal comfort, until he is reduced to fits of rage at the slightest provocation. Self-centered people are unhappy, constantly complain, have little joy, and strain relationships.¹¹

Self will never be able to occupy the center of our lives and bring any degree of joy. We need a vision much greater than self, a cause beyond the scope of self, to capture our hearts. We need to see our insufficiency and our need for mercy to wash over our lives.

B. God offers mercy as the way out of self-centeredness.

⁹ T.D. Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, TOTC*, 128.

¹⁰ My old friend Flash used to say, *Every dog has his day*.

¹¹ Richard Phillips, *Jonah and Micah, REC* (P&R, 2010), 127-128.

The way out of our self-centered misery is to see our own need for mercy and our need to extend that mercy to others. Mercy brings us out of self into an others-centered frame of living.¹²

Again, God questions Jonah, *Do you do well to be angry for the plant (9a)?* This time Jonah answers, *Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die (9b).* Do you see what is happening here? Jonah denied God the right to be merciful to the Ninevites (1-3), and here, challenges the right of God to destroy the plant (8b). Jonah denied God the right to save and to destroy. Nothing satisfies the soul of the angry man. His life is full of inconsistency.

God points out Jonah's inconsistency and asserts the rightness of his mercy. If mercy is a character flaw in God, would it not be a character flaw in Jonah? Yet, Jonah had mercy for the *plant* (10a). This is what *pity* means. He had compassion for the plant! The inconsistency lies with Jonah not with God. God is acting totally consistent with his nature. Jonah had compassion for a plant but not for Nineveh, not for humans made in the image of God.

Jonah pitied the plant that he neither planted nor made grow, and only enjoyed for a day (10). Reasoning from the lesser to the greater, God argues, if you pitied a plant, you did not create, *Should I not pity Nineveh, a city I created (11).* It was a great city: 120,000 people made the image of God and enough livestock to support them; 10 times the size of Jerusalem in Jonah's day.

The people of Nineveh did not know their right hand from their left. That is, they had not had the advantages Jonah and Israel enjoyed. God had made no covenant with them. They had had no special revelation: no law and no prophets preaching to them the word of God. Israel enjoyed all those things, and yet refused to repent. The first special revelation, the first word from God, they had ever had was when Jonah showed up preaching, *Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown (3:4)!* And they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

God's answer to Jonah's prayer in verse 2-3 is His speech to Jonah in verses 10-11.¹³ Mercy is no character flaw in God. The argument of the book is simply this, our God is merciful. The only way out of self-centered anger is to view the

¹² Phillips, 128.

¹³ Jonah's prayer in verses 2-3 is 39 words in the Hebrew text. God's final words to Jonah in verses 10-11 is 39 words in the Hebrew text. See Trimmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God*, 130.

world the way God does and become agents of His mercy. Thus, we are left with a question that we may ponder the mercy of God.