

"God's Gentle Patience With His Petulant Servants"

Have you ever driven through a long stretch of road construction? There are rough patches and flagmen stopping you for oncoming traffic. Finally, you roll onto smooth pavement and see an open road stretching out before you. Sometimes, there is a sign there: *"End of construction, thank you for your patience."* Maybe when my time comes to leave this earth, that would be a great inscription to carve into my gravestone. *"End of construction. Thank you for your patience."* In the Christian faith, when you put your faith in Christ and invite him into your life, he begins to work on you to change you into the person he wants you to become. It's a process. It requires patience. What I realized looking at Jonah this week is that while we need to be patient with this process and others need to be patient with us through it, the one who shows the greatest patience in all of this is God. Jonah shows us how graciously patient God is with people even while involving them in his work in the world. It also shows us how lost we can be in our own emotions and out of touch with the will of God, the ways of God, the goodness and glory of God. That's not a good thing, but it is common, and it was certainly the case with Jonah.

Jonah 4 begins with Jonah's anger and it teaches us that...

- I. SOMETIMES, IN SPITE OF WHAT WE CLAIM TO KNOW ABOUT GOD, WE ALLOW OUR EMOTIONS TO OVERWHELM US IN UNHEALTHY WAYS.**

There is an interesting play on words in **Jonah 3:10** to **Jonah 4:1**. The same Hebrew word appears three times in two verses, and it's translated differently in English each time. It's the Hebrew word *ra-ah*. This is a very flexible word. It can mean evil, like sin and wickedness, or other bad things, like misery, a natural disaster, or God's judgment. **Jonah 3:10** says: *When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil (ra-ah) way, God relented of the disaster (ra-ah) that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.* **Jonah 4:1** says, *But it displeased (ra-ah) Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.* The

Ninevites got rid of their *ra-ah*. God let go of His *ra-ah*. The only one still holding onto *ra-ah* is Jonah! How angry was *he*? *He was furious. It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.* The Hebrew uses the word to be *hot* or to *burn* in anger.¹ He is furious at what God is doing and how things are going. *Have you ever been mad at God?*

A. Does it Matter Why We Get Angry with God?

On the *surface*, the reason for his anger is that God has shown grace to the Ninevites, but the question remains: *why did that* make Jonah so furious. The *text never clearly states the underlying* reason for Jonah's deep displeasure and bitterness. Historically, there have been three primary views. The first is that Jonah just hated the Ninevites. Later, in **verse 11**, God will ask Jonah this question: Should I not pity Nineveh? According to this view, Jonah's thinking is, *"No, I hate them. They're the enemy. They are horrible."* The second view is that, certainly, Jonah is, at best, indifferent to the fate of the Ninevites, but his primary concern really is for God's glory. In *this scenario, to the question, "Should I not pity Nineveh?"* Jonah would have said, *"No because if you pity Nineveh, you dishonor yourself And cast doubt on the reliability of your own word."* The third view is that while Jonah is undoubtedly lacking in compassion for the Ninevites, what makes him so mad is that his personal credibility and honor has been undermined. To the question of God, *should I not pity Nineveh?* The answer of Jonah would have been *no because if you do, you make me look like a fool and a false prophet, and you've embarrassed me.* John Calvin held this view. Interestingly, this was the most ancient view of some of the earliest church fathers like Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret: *"God, you made me look bad!"* ² How petulant – childish.

Maybe it doesn't matter exactly why this was such a big deal for him. because in the end the issue isn't the precise reason why this servant of God was so angry but the fact that he *was* so angry. Later in **verse 9** when God asks Jonah, *"do you do well to be angry?"* The clearly implied answer to the rhetorical questions is "no." Jonah is not doing well to be angry. It's also helpful to allow the question that we overhear God asking Jonah to come home directly to our hearts do you do well

to be angry? Are you doing well to be angry? Dealing with anger wisely, righteously is going to be one of the biggest issues in your life.

B. Does it Matter How We Handle Anger at God?

The late doctor David Powlinson was the senior editor of the Journal of Biblical Psychology and a practicing psychologist who also worked at a Psychiatric hospital. He wrote a book called *Good and Angry*. In that book, he says that based on his counseling experience and his study of Scripture, much of the standard self-help advice confuses the issue rather than clarifying it. The Bible doesn't advocate denial but it also doesn't encourage rage. It doesn't call for stoic suppression of feelings but the thoughtful, prayerful attention to strong emotions so that we handle anger well. The one thing we cannot do is think that our anger justifies sinful choices, estrangement from God, the hatred of our calling, or an unwillingness to go on. He writes about the Psalms in which anger is expressed. He says, *No psalm encourages the venting of hostile anger like the self-help books encourage*. He explains that what's needed is not simply that you vent your anger at God or coddle it but that you allow it to show you areas where you need to deepen your trust, your surrender, your acceptance, and even your hope. He writes *When the Bible teaches how to voice distress to God, it teaches a cry of faith, not a roar of rage. The self-help teaching fails to help troubled people complain to a God they love.*"

People who are angry at God and don't deal with that anger in a wise and godly way *do not do well*. Instead of turning to God's in dependence, and go deeper with him they turn from him and walk away. There is a better way than that. It helps to begin by admitting deeply that *Sometimes, in spite of what we claim to know about God, we allow our emotions to overwhelm us in unhealthy ways.*

Now, the second thing that comes through in these verses is this:

II. THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD'S HEART CAN HEAL OUR HEARTS IF WE TRULY TAKE IT TO HEART.

In **verses 2-3**, Jonah pours out his frustration at God by listing some of the qualities of God's goodness and grace. And he's using part of a classic passage describing God. It comes from **Exodus 34**. It is a confession of faith that is found numerous times throughout the Old Testament.³ Jonah selects only part of the passage. The part that he recites consists of two pairs of attributes followed by the addition of a line then a final line that reveals how who God is affects what he does.

First, he says...

A. God is Gracious and Merciful.

Grace is kindness that is given without concern for what is deserved. It is a free gift, an undeserved favor. **Exodus 22:26-27** *If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, ²⁷ for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. (That's the same word as gracious)* The cloak is the guarantee, the collateral to ensure he pays you back what you've loaned him. But even before he pays you back, you show grace. The word "*mercy*" comes from the Hebrew word for the womb. It is derived from a mother's compassion and pity for a helpless infant. It is often translated as "*tender mercy.*" This is who he is – our God.

*Looking back at **Jonah 4:2** There is a second set of attributes.*

B. God is Slow to Anger and Abounding in Steadfast Love.

That's an interesting contrast, isn't it? God is patient and his love is persistent. You doesn't get angry quickly, and you cannot exhaust his love. *Steadfast love* – that is the word *hesed*, that we have seen before in Jonah. It describes the loyal love of an unobligated giver to an undeserving person. The heart of God is like an inexhaustible spring of water that bubbles up in unrelenting love for undeserving people.

Because this is who God is – here is what he does.

C. God Relents from Disaster.

This does not mean that God the righteous judge will *never ever* judge humanity. What it does mean is that the heart of God loves to show mercy. What it promises is that humility and repentance will always receive grace and compassion!

The truth about God's heart can heal our hearts if we take it to heart but the problem is that sometimes we just don't. In **verse 3**, Jonah says: *Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.*” Whenever there is some plan, some person, thing so important that you would rather die than live without it, that thing has become a toxic soul-eating parasite at the center of your life – it's dishonoring to the God who deserves trust and devotion and it's so destructive to us.

Here is the amazing thing: this is what impresses me as I think about this story. What Jonah shows us is that ...

III. **GOD DOES NOT GIVE UP ON YOU EVEN WHEN YOU ARE ANGRY WITH HIM AND UNLOVING TOWARD OTHERS.**

Jonah is indifferent, if not hateful toward the Ninevites. He is angry at God. But like a patient, Father God comes to Jonah and tries to help him see the truth. **Verse 4** says, *And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”* God says I want you to be with me in the work I'm doing in the world I want you to trust me with the things you don't understand this isn't good this anger.

Do you know that...

A. God is persistent with us even when we are resistant to change and slow to grow.

Jonah is a mess. Blind to his own stubborn sinfulness rebellious toward God, and resistant to change, but God comes to him and talks with and counsels with him and works to help him come to his senses.

One of the thought-provoking lessons of this story is that we can have profound experiences of the grace of God and answers to prayer, and we can clearly confess the truth about the love of God and yet fail to

rest in, rely on or enjoy the reality of the love of God. Remember how Jonah felt after God had answered his prayer for salvation and saved his life out of the sea? He said: *"I will offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and fulfill my vows to the LORD."* That was authentic and heartfelt when he said that. But what his story shows us is that we can be in that place of thanksgiving, and then later, some new circumstance of life tests us again, and we forget the goodness of God. Our emotions cloud our thinking, and our sins are exposed again. What then? Does God write us off in disgust? No. God is there, patient, calling us back to Himself. Answer his call, surrender your resistance, and come to him.

Strong emotions can be used by God to show you where you are clinging to something that you have to relinquish. You need to say, "I am hurting and confused, but nothing is more important than trusting you, surrendering to faith to hope in your promises, choosing to believe that you are faithful and you are with me. You are *gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

So, the answer to the question, "Do you do well to be angry?" Is "no."

B. It is Not Good to be Angry at God.

God is so beautifully gracious, patient, and abounding in love that it is foolish to resist his transforming influence in your life. There was a play written years ago called *"Arms too short to box with God."* It's true our arms are too short to box with God, but that's not the only reason we should not fight him. We should not fight with God because when we fight with God, we're fighting against grace, mercy, patience, and abounding steadfast love.

A friend from Bible College, Hart Hogan, called me Saturday. He said he was listening to an audible book by Dallas Willard called *The Divine Conspiracy*. In it, Dallas Willard quoted CS Lewis. There is a chapter in CS Lewis' book *Mere Christianity* titled *obstinate tin soldiers* Lewis says that we are like obstinate tin soldiers and God is working to change us into fully developed humans, "fully and splendidly alive." My friend Hart said he had to pull off the road and back up the audio in order to write down this one quote: *Our faith is not a matter of hearing*

what he said 2000 years ago and trying to carry it out. Rather, the real son of God is at your side. He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as himself. He is beginning to inject his kind of life and thought into you, beginning to turn the tin soldier into a man. The part of you that doesn't like it is the part that is still tin. This is what we're seeing God do in Jonah's life and it's what he does in our lives today!

God does not need to meet our demands or expectations. In **Isaiah 55:8-9** he says, *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* He is gracious and merciful and abounding in love, and we're not. We don't see things as he sees and understands them. That means that some things are beyond our understanding and so very hard to accept. But this is also where the deep spiritual work of grace and sanctification gets done. So, we have to learn to change to grow, to lay down our imperfect understanding, lay down our self-centered expectations, lay down our hard-hearted biases, and surrender to his perfect love and wisdom. That's what he is working so patiently to get Jonah to do in this story, and that is what he is working to do in your life and in mine.

CONCLUSION

This theme of God's steadfast love and yet his often-mysterious ways runs through the whole of the Bible and leads us right to Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God Himself comes right down into the sinful city of mankind. He becomes one of us but he lives a beautiful strong righteous life. He is the only one who ever truly lives a sinless life yet doesn't resent or resist God's love being shared with all kinds of sinners. He goes to the cross, suffers and gives himself as a sacrifice for our sins. And he rises again to be our Savior.

I once read the testimony of a woman who told how, when she was a young girl, she went to church and would listen to the messages and even go to Sunday school. She learned a lot but never really committed her life to faith in Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She grew

up, got married, and found out that her husband suffered from a mental illness. Her husband was constantly causing problems, so finally, she left him. He repeatedly called and pleaded with her to come back, but she refused. Finally, he threatened suicide, and she told him, "Go ahead." And he did. She remembers driving from the funeral in a bitter mix of remorse over what she had said and anger at what God allowed. She shook her fist and said, *"Go to hell, God."* Sounds like Jonah, doesn't it? Does the creator of the universe really take that from sinful human beings and continue to show grace and love? Yes, he does. This woman said that when she said that, *"It was like someone flipped a switch. She said she suddenly realized that was exactly what God did. He went to hell for me that I might go to heaven with Him."*

She wasn't talking about Jesus literally going to the place the Bible describes as hell but the truth that on the cross, Jesus suffered the agony of God forsakeness us to pay for our sins. And so her own anger at God and the cursing that came from it startled her into the realization of what God actually had done for her salvation. And she realized, in spite of all the hard things she did not understand, God really is a God of grace and steadfast love. She had to decide whether she would live in angry or surrender in repentance to trust in Him. She chose surrender, repentance, and trust. That's the choice to which God constantly calls all of us.

If you've never come to Christ, you have to come to Christ, not claiming that you deserve his love or could earn his love but admitting that you don't and you can't. With the repentance that hates both sin and self-righteousness, you turn to him as Lord and trust in him as Savior. You just have to quit fighting and admit that you are not God, and he is.

Now that Christ has come, God has made everything centered on what you do with him and how you respond to him. Make sure that you come to Christ and receive his grace. If you have, then keep trusting him. Believe – truly believe what you confess to be true about the love of God and the God who loves like no other.

Amen.

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

O Lord, I need your grace, mercy, and steadfast love. I thank you that, in Jesus, you sent someone much greater than Jonah. You sent, not just a prophet to call us to repentance, but a Savior whose death and resurrection provide the salvation we could never earn or deserve. I am and have been sinful. I am and have been willful, but I rest in and rely fully on Jesus as my savior. Thank you for your steadfast love and Amazing Grace.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Almighty God, my Heavenly Father, help me to surrender more fully and to go deeper into my relationship with you. When my emotions seem so powerful and present, my grasp of your goodness recedes into a lifeless confession instead of a life-giving confidence. Deal patiently but persistently with me in grace. Counter my confusion with the clarity of your word and your Spirit. Help me to grow, and when growing hurts, help me to hope and to trust in you. Amen

1 קָרָה *burn, be kindled, of anger*

2 These different perspectives are outlined and discussed in *The New American Commentary, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, Billy K. Smith, Frank S. Page. Pages 271-272.

3 Exodus 34:6-7, It is found or alluded to in the following: 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:31; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 111:4, 112:4; 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17; 2 Kings 13:23; Nahum 1:3; Joel 2:13