

**Angry at Compassion: The Scandal of Grace**  
**Jonah 4:1–11**  
**May 7, 2023**

“Grace is a scandal,” someone once wrote, “because it insists on including those whom we wish to exclude.”<sup>1</sup> An example of this spirit is found in Luke 19 with the story of Zacchaeus. Not unlike the children’s accounts of Jonah, or the pictures of Noah’s ark, the songs about Zacchaeus clean him up a bit too much. Sure, he’s a *not*–tall man in a tree, but that melodic line ignores the spite that pervades Luke 19.

There, the doctor–historian describes Zacchaeus as a tax collector (Luke 19:2), one of the most despised characters in all of Judaism. They were *so* despised that the Talmud put them on the same level as murderers.<sup>2</sup> Like traitors, these men collected money for the Romans—the ruthless oppressor of Israel. And not only had they betrayed their own people, they likely cooked the books to their own financial advantage.

In first–century Israel, there were a number of these despised men. Because of that, it seems as if they needed some form of organization. So, in Luke 19 we read a word used nowhere else in the New Testament, describing Zacchaeus not merely as a tax collector, but as a **chief tax collector**. Why is that distinction—chief—important? Because, while the Jewish people shared significant disdain for whoever took their money unjustly, also—like *us*, maybe—they had a special brand of contempt for the boss of the traitors, the public face of it. So, if this “tax collecting” were a pyramid scheme, Zacchaeus was the man at the top—the Madoff of ire.<sup>3</sup>

The Jewish people were far from ambivalent toward him. He’d done them *harm*. And in Luke 19, when Zacchaeus is called down from the tree to host the Son of Man, Luke writes of their response: **When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.”** Though these grumblers had shown up to see *for themselves* this Man from Nazareth, they were disgusted that He would deign to sup with this scam artist. Grace is a scandal because it insists on including those whom we wish to exclude.

And it insisted *long before* Luke 19. As we’ve said, Jonah—as well as many of his fellow Jewish friends and family—detested the Ninevites. Maybe we’d say it was for good reason. The Assyrian empire had been built by brutal military action, spurred by a pagan rationale and achieved by godless methods.<sup>4</sup> We’ve compared it’s brutality to ISIS in the past few weeks. Yet, due to the power Assyria held, the threat to Israel was probably much, much worse.

However, last week we saw and should’ve been shocked by their radical repentance. Every mark of true biblical repentance—Godly sorrow, acknowledgement of sin, and *turning* from that sin toward God—was described in Jonah 3. Further, the text makes clear that they weren’t merely faking it, trying to dodge the repercussions. No, God *Himself* saw that they **turned from their wicked way** (3:10). And He showed Nineveh mercy.

That’s how chapter 3 ends, with Nineveh’s repentance and God’s compassionate mercy. Then, one verse later, chapter 4 begins: **But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.**

### 1. Jonah’s Anger at God’s Character (vv. 1–4)

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<sup>1</sup> James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 533.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio–Rhetorical Commentary*, 120.

<sup>3</sup> I owe this analogy to Josh Smith.

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God*, 64.

In preparation for this week, I decided to memorize an entire chapter of David Powlison's book *Good and Angry*. You might know which chapter I'm talking about. It's chapter 2, entitled, "Do You Have a Serious Problem with Anger?" The body of the chapter goes like this: "Yes." Then, masterfully, Powlison dives into some discussion questions.<sup>5</sup>

Google "the rise of anger" and you'll find think pieces from many of the major publications in our day. We're surrounded by rage. Though anger can certainly take different forms, from the extreme of violence to the *less* noticeable irritability or to the *even less* noticeable bitterness, nonetheless, *most* if not *all* of us wrestle with some measure of anger.<sup>6</sup>

In our text, Jonah's angry. We see it here in verse 1. God will ask a question about it in verse 4, and then again in verse 9. As it's weaved throughout this passage, it's clear that Jonah's anger is a central issue in this text. What's unique here, however, is *that which* angers Jonah. The "it" which greatly displeased Jonah is that God did not judge the Assyrians. Mercy angered him.

Back in chapter 1, the book tells us that Jonah responds to God's word by running the other way. We were *not* told then *why* Jonah fled, though that would seem to be a good time to detail Jonah's motive. One commentator I read made the case that, "Jonah frequently suppresses information where the reader most expects or desires it in order to reveal it later when least expected."<sup>7</sup> Along those lines, if we were reading Jonah for the first time we might assume the end of the story was chapter 3. The fleeing prophet, the sea monster, and the radical repentance of the pagans was surely enough drama for one book. God showed mercy. Curtains.

Yet, when we might not expect it, we're suddenly told *why* Jonah fled back in chapter 1. Verse 2: **He prayed to the Lord and said, "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish.** Jonah ran to forestall *this*. What is *this*? Jonah prays, in essence, "I ran because I knew *this* is what You'd do. You'd show mercy."

He knew *this* is what Yahweh would do *because* he knew His character. Verse 2 goes on: **Was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.**

We shouldn't dodge Jonah's words. In the Old Testament, it might be the most un-prophet-like sentence *any* prophet uttered. Jonah is angry at who God is, saying in essence, "I knew You'd do this. *This* is what You do." He knew who God was because he knew the revelation of God. He's quoting truths about God revealed in Exodus 34, as well as truths Israel sang in the Psalms (86, 103, 145). The God Jonah knows is gracious, compassionate, and abundant in lovingkindness.

And yet, though he knew this, in chapter 1 he'd tried to get in the way of it—attempting to thwart what God might do—by fleeing. That didn't work. It didn't come close. So now, in chapter 4, he's angry that God is slow to anger.

How angry is he? Verse 3: **Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.** In verse 8, he'll say something to this effect again. Then he'll repeat it in verse 9. *Three* times in this passage he's asking to die. It's worth noticing—and being reminded—that these folks in the Bible were not always pristine, other-worldly men and women. We're not the first to spiral. We're not the first to despair. Jonah's a complicated mess.

He asks the Lord to take his life from him. Then the Lord asks him something. Verse 4: **The Lord said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"**

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<sup>5</sup> David Powlison, *Good and Angry*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Even if it's righteous indignation.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah*, ZECOT, 56.

Is it possible that there are corners of our mind and heart that would prefer God to be a little different than He is? Is there a simmering, under the surface, unspoken frustration concerning something about Him? Those are tough questions to answer. So was the question the Lord asked Jonah. He doesn't answer, yet. Note secondly,

## 2. Jonah's Anger at God's Acts (vv. 5–9)

Verse 5: **Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.**

Ancient Nineveh is in modern-day northern Iraq. So, as we think through the balance of this passage, we should envision Jonah being out in the heat of the Middle-East. In that setting, he'd gone east of the city and made a shelter for shade. Why does he need shade? Why is he hanging around post-repentance? He was hanging around **until he could see what would happen in the city.**

There are a number of reasons Jonah might've decided to do this. First, maybe he was doubtful Nineveh would remain repentant, hoping to see them return to their wicked ways and, then, meet their demise. That's one possibility. Or, it's possible he's hoping God would reconsider.<sup>8</sup> Jonah has clearly pitted God's justice *against* His mercy. Some would even say that Jonah's plea concerning his *own* death was something of an ultimatum—"it's *them* or *me*." Was Jonah hanging around hoping his plea—his threat—might move the needle?<sup>9</sup> Regardless, he seems to be unconvinced that God would continue to spare Nineveh.<sup>10</sup> And, so, whenever God acted upon Israel's enemies in judgment, Jonah was going to have a front row seat.

In verses 6, 7, and 8 we see the verb translated, "God appointed." It's the same word used back in chapter 1 when **God appointed a great fish**. According to this minor prophet, Yahweh's sovereign rule over creation is far from a minor theme. Verse 6: **So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort.**

Note that even as Jonah continues to stew, the Lord has graciously given to Jonah. How does Jonah respond to this shade-giving gourd of a plant? Verse 6 concludes: **And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.** It's the same kind of grammatical construction as verse 1 where Jonah was **greatly displeased**, except it's the opposite emotion to the extreme. A literal translation of this phrase might be, "Jonah rejoiced concerning the plant a great rejoicing."<sup>11</sup> Jonah seems to be an emotional rollercoaster, doesn't he? I've always appreciated the song lyric, "I know there's a balance; I see it when I swing past." That's Jonah, at least in chapter 4.

If you're not convinced that's Jonah, let's read verses 7 and 8: **But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."**

Clearly Jonah's hut was not sufficient shade.<sup>12</sup> Back in verse 5, we saw that Jonah sat on the east side of the city. This scorching wind God appointed comes from where? The east. And Jonah's protection from the elements in the form of a plant was now gone. Again, it's hot. I remember doing drills in high school in the middle of the summer and watching folks pass out and face plant

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<sup>8</sup> Desmond Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, TOTC, 141.

<sup>9</sup> Youngblood, 166.

<sup>10</sup> Timmer, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, 411.

<sup>12</sup> Youngblood, 168.

from the heat. Some of you have jobs where your boots turn into pools of sweat in a Memphis July. Yet none of us have probably spent much time in a Middle Eastern desert. Without this plant, Jonah becomes faint. Interestingly, the verb for the **sun beat down** is the same verb as the worm attacking the plant.<sup>13</sup> It's as if the sun was attacking him.

Again, note the verbs. There's no ambiguity. Just as God appointed the plant, God appointed the worm. And just as He appointed both of those, He appointed an east wind. Jonah knows that too. He'd asked God back in verse 3, **please take my life from me**. Here, and don't miss this language, Jonah **begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."**

Can we be honest? We might not have recently said what Jonah said, but maybe there are days we don't want to get out of bed. Things don't go as we plan. Burdens pile up. And we're exhausted, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. If you've *never* been there, thanks be to the Lord. But if you have, you should know you're not alone.

Back in verse 4, God asked, **Do you have good reason to be angry?** Jonah didn't answer. Here in verse 9, God asks the same question, though a bit more pointed: **Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?"** This time Jonah responds. **And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."** He'd been angry about God's right to deliver the Ninevites. Now he's angry about God's right to destroy.<sup>14</sup> In both cases, we might say, he's angry at what God's done.

Maybe earlier the question, "Is there a simmering, under the surface, unspoken frustration with God's character?" was an uncomfortable question. It was for me as I pondered it this week. Clearly it was for Jonah. But let's keep in mind: God is not divisible.<sup>15</sup> We can't separate His acts from His character. We read in Sproul this week, "His actions are perfect because His nature is perfect, and He *always* acts according to his nature."<sup>16</sup> So, we have to wrestle with the fact that what He appoints is what He's chosen to be wise.

So, what is it that we're angry about? What is at the root of our bitterness? If it's anger at the injustices of this groaning creation, that's one thing. If it's anger or bitterness at the purposes of a sovereign God, that's another matter. If so, we ought to ask the Lord to help us do the deep work of reflecting, of repenting where needed, and seeking joy in the knowledge that His wisdom is better than ours.

In this case, Jonah's angry at what God's done. And he's certainly not separated it from who God is. He connected the dots back in verse 2: **I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God.** There's another man in the New Testament that embodied the same spirit, angry at mercy. He's described in Luke 15:28 **But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, "Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who had devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him."**<sup>17</sup>

Grace is a scandal because it insists on including those whom we wish to exclude. And our issue with grace *is* an issue with the God that bestows it. And that—to be clear—is an issue of the gospel. The elder brother thought he'd earned God's mercy or favor. The prodigal wasn't good

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander, 143.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, 143.

<sup>15</sup> Appreciate David Johnson making this point to me this week.

<sup>16</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 33, emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Wilbanks made the elder brother connection for me.

enough for it. “Have you seen what he’s done?!” It seems that Jonah thinks others aren’t worthy either. In that sense, he was right.

### 3. God’s Character Acts (vv. 10–11)

Verse 10: **Then the Lord said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?”**

Again, in one sense Jonah was right. The Ninevites weren’t worthy of mercy. They’d not earned God’s pursuit of them, not at all. Yet, the book of Jonah is an account, not primarily of a fish, nor of a reluctant prophet, nor even of Nineveh’s repentance; it’s a vivid account—with twists and turns—of the relentless compassion of a sovereign God upon an undeserving people.

Jonah didn’t cause that plant to grow. He did *nothing* to bring about its existence. It came and went. So, if Jonah cared about *that* plant, is it a surprise that God would care about those Ninevites He fashioned? In chapter 3:3 we noted that a likely reading of that verse included the idea of Nineveh being “a great city to God.”<sup>18</sup> Whether or not that’s the proper interpretation of *that* particular verse, we do find it to be the proper conclusion here in verse 11. God says: **Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city?**

Does this mean they were great *intrinsically*, by nature? Had they done great, or Godly, things? No, the wickedness of the Ninevites had come up before God (1:3). He’d sent a prophet to warn them of soon judgment. They’d earned something altogether different from mercy. Yet, how does God speak of them? Verse 11: **Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?** Yahweh pursued them in love, but *not* because they were lovely. He did so because He’s gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness. This is who He is.

### Conclusion

Grace is a scandal because it insists on including those whom we wish to exclude.

For one more example—beyond Jonah or the elder brother—in Luke 7 Jesus is eating with the Pharisees when a woman comes in the room. She quickly wet His feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair (7:38). And, then, we read a nearby Pharisee’s comment, **If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner** (7:39). Was that Pharisee right about her character? Absolutely. But was he right about the character of the Man with tears on His feet? Not even close. That Man knew who she was. And that’s *precisely* the kind of person He came for.

It was, of course, the same with Zacchaeus. Recall how that story ends. The crowds scoff and grumble concerning the scoundrel Jesus eats with. Yet, Jesus made the purpose of His advent plain, **The Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost** (Luke 19:10)

If I’m self-righteous, this God revealed in the Scriptures is not the God I want. I might even resent Him. Because all my morality amounts to *nothing* if He’s so lavish in forgiving screw-ups.

Yet, if I know my sin, in visceral ways, then *this* message—*this* message about *this* God—in Jonah, in Luke, on nearly every page of Scripture—is not a message I’m angry at. Because grace—the God of grace—insisted on including *us*.

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<sup>18</sup> See ESV marginal reading.